

# The man who

Norman Mailer is meticulous in his examination of Lee Harvey

Lee Harvey Oswald wanted to be remembered; to leave a mark on the world. We do not know precisely what his own standard of success may have been, but we may say that he got his wish. Not only is he America's most notorious assassin, he is also one of America's most celebrated murder victims.

Nor are these fixed, timeless, Hall of Fame categories, of the sort which decay with the years. There are millions of Americans who would find my flat, factual sentence above to be wholly subjective. It could be that Oswald was not an assassin at all. Or it could be that he was either a pawn or a cog. And it could be that he was not a murder victim pure and simple but was himself the object of an assassination.

Anybody over the age of 45 has a real time memory of this controversy, which is as "live" today as it ever was. (Just to give an example, one of last year's best-sellers was a book entitled *Case Closed*, by Gerald Posner, which claimed to validate all the substantive findings of the Warren Commission. It was published, with this impossibly jaunty and optimistic title, just as an enormous tranche of Kennedy assassination files was being opened – partly as a consequence of lobbying by Oliver Stone, the director of *JFK*.)

Thus, in his 70th year, Norman

Mailer found himself living in a freezing proletarian apartment in the Russian city of Minsk. He may have consoled himself, as the long nights drew in, with the thought that this was meant to happen. He had met, and written about, the boy-President JFK and his glamorous wife Jackie. He had also attempted to trace the life and death of Marilyn Monroe, another iconographic figure of the period and a woman who kept company both with Jack Kennedy and his soon-to-be-murdered brother Robert.

Revenues from Mailer novels and films had gone to help fund the Assassinations Information Bureau in Washington, and other enterprises devoted to challenging the official truth about the 1960s. In his last novel, the refrigerator-sized masterpiece, *Harlot's Ghost*, he had attempted the grand subject of the CIA as, in its own words, "the mind of America". That novel, which ends with the words "to be continued", closes roughly when the threads of Cuba, Vietnam, the Mafia and the appointment in Dallas have begun to converge.

We can read *Oswald's Tale*, then,

as the fruit of a forensic expedition, mounted for journalistic purposes but into fictional themes. (Mailer's research collaborator on the book, Larry Schiller, is his digging-partner from *The Executioner's Song*.) Having gained, with Schiller's help, direct access to the KGB files on Oswald, it fell to Mailer to trace and retrace the steps: to find out what it had been like to be this mysterious, world-shattering loser and loner. He began by finding out what it had been like to be his wife.

Marina, the girl-child of austerity and war and xenophobia, was what the Russians call *izbalovanaya* – a rather charming term which signifies not so much "spoiled" as having been loved too much. She considered herself a bit more cultured than the rest; a distinction she manifested in a fondness for American rather than Russian novels. Dreiser was her favourite. When she met an actual American at a dance at the Trade Union Palace, she felt that her entrée to a more cultured existence had materialised. She should have asked Rimma, the Intourist guide who met Lee Harvey Oswald first. She should have been able to

speak to his former shipmates in the US Marine Corps. She should have been warned that here was a guy prone to suicide, to delusions of grandeur, to depressive conduct and to the making of enigmas about himself.

She soon found out, as the KGB surveillance tapes of their cramped apartment make clear. Everyone

OSWALD'S TALE: AN  
AMERICAN MYSTERY  
by Norman Mailer

*Little, Brown £25, 791 pages*

else who met Oswald, from his landladies to his acquaintances in the political demi-monde, was to make similar discoveries sooner or later.

Mailer goes to impressive trouble to immerse himself in the context here. He even at one point practices writing in the Russian style – without the definite article – to convey the flavour of conversation and exchange. So many authors have furrowed the same field in so many repetitive and derivative ways that it is a pleasure to read a real writer on an authentically new trail.

# killed JFK

Oswald, writes Christopher Hitchens

Mailer's conclusions about Oswald in Russia become his conclusions about Oswald in America, too. The man was by nature a fantasist and a betrayer and a megalomaniac. It would therefore have been rash to try to recruit him into any conspiracy. For one thing, Oswald always wanted sole credit for everything. For another, he was bad at obeying any sort of discipline. At a certain empirical level, this extension of the theory is quite effective.

Unfortunately, Mailer's American footwork and legwork is not as exhaustive or as convincing as his Minsk material. He allows himself some promiscuous speculations – about Oswald's sex life for example – which are not underpinned by fact. He takes issue with a few of Gerald Posner's findings, about Oswald's days in New Orleans, but has not brought himself up to date with the new researches about Oswald's role as a "double" in the political underworld of that city.

Professor John Newman, in his recent book *Oswald and the CIA*, presents astonishing documents which appear to demonstrate that

elements of the American security apparatus took a keen and active interest in Oswald from at least the time of his defection to the USSR, and maintained close contact with him until just before the assassination. The various "weedings" of, and tamperings with, this official record do little to inspire confidence.

We are left, as ever, with the maddening fact that Oswald was silenced before he could be tried, or even questioned. Using his same Occam's Razor method, Mailer concludes that nothing but coincidence is involved in Jack Ruby's coming face-to-face with Oswald, gun in hand, in the Dallas police department. His prose becomes almost Runyonesque at this point, once again taking on the qualities of its subject: "Yes, he will tell people, he simply cannot bear the thought of that beautiful woman, the former First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy, being obliged to return to Dallas and testify. You pay your money and you take your choice, but as a betting proposition – with all due respect to Jacqueline Kennedy – it must be 18 to 5 that Ruby is think-

ing of himself. And if it were anyone but Jacqueline Kennedy, the odds might be 99 to one that he is brooding about no one but himself. All he has is his life, and it is being taken away from him. A precious gem, a ruby, is about to be thrown into the crapper."

Observation of Ruby's ostensible actions and state of mind make him seem like another loner and loser all right (even if he did later beg the Warren Commission to move him to Washington so that he could tell them – what?) It may be more relevant to note that Mailer is mistaken in taking on trust the story of Ruby as broke. We now know that somebody gave him \$7,000 in cash in mid to late November of 1963.

Given Mailer's past fondness for the anti-Warren forces, and given a natural writerly prejudice in favour of meaning and pattern over sordid, random coincidence, it is admirable of him to come to a conclusion that lies athwart his prejudices. The king was killed, and you and I and all of us fell down, and it was all for nothing. It had no solemn or sinister significance. It was just one of those things, or one damn thing piled on another. This is a narrative of tremendous energy and panache; the author of *The Presidential Papers* at the top of his form. But it leaves some ghosts, unlike some harlots, still un-laid.

■ Christopher Hitchens is critic-at-large for *Vanity Fair*.

# BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS

## Just the Facts—Please

JACOB COHEN

AFTER living nearly three years in the USSR, Lee Harvey Oswald—accompanied by Marina, his Russian wife, and their infant child—returned by boat to America in early June of 1962. During that trip Oswald jotted down a kind of political testament, using the stationery of the Holland–America line, and Norman Mailer offers one passage from those notes as a proof-text for his thesis that President Kennedy’s (probably) lone assassin was a solipsistic anarchist cum nihilist, who was ultimately oblivious to the myriad conspiratorial sirens close about him who may have tried to lure him into their service. With stoic intensity and with an idealistic ruthlessness reminiscent of the great-souled heroes and anti-heroes whom he had studied—Lenin, Mao, Hitler, Castro—Oswald tried to forge a new world single-handedly by murdering the most vibrant living symbol of the old. “I wonder what would happen,” he wrote, “if someone would stand up and say he was utterly opposed

*Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*, by Norman Mailer (Random House, 791 pp., \$30)

not only to the government, but to the people, to the entire land and complete foundation of his society.”

A novel theory (and very much a novelist’s theory), which I shall comment on, but first let me point out that according to one of Mailer’s principal sources, Edward Jay Epstein—whose “landmark” book *Legend* Mailer praises to the skies—this passage was actually dictated to Oswald by a Russian-speaking agent on the ship who was further coaching him in the legend of the dreadfully unhappy, highly erratic, suicidally unstable, murderously impulsive, lonely leftist nut that the Soviets created as cover for their operative. Indeed, according to Epstein, everything of significance that Oswald ever wrote was a KGB concoction: his letters seeking readmission to the United States, his

“Historic Diary” (on which Mailer relies heavily), the detailed notes he prepared on life in the Soviet Union (which Mailer includes in a long appendix to support his notion that Oswald was an extremely intelligent observer and critic of the Soviet system), the Holland–America notes, which were found, and apparently were intended to be found, among Oswald’s effects after the assassination.

Clearly, Epstein’s view of Oswald and Mailer’s are mutually exclusive, or so it would seem. Furthermore, there could



Frederick H. Carlson

not be a more devastating factual disproof of Epstein’s thesis than is inferable from the impressive Russian section of Mailer’s book, which is based on many new interviews with co-workers, friends, sweethearts, KGB observers, and high officials, and on many declassified KGB documents detailing the unrelenting human and electronic surveillance of Oswald’s every movement and intimate conversation while in Russia. In this small mountain of evidence there is not a hint of anything supporting Epstein’s surmise. The picture of Oswald in Russia revealed by Mailer’s new evidence shows a surprisingly inept, somewhat lazy, irresolute, romantic, intellectually banal homebody and fantasist, whom the understandably suspicious Russians finally found to be boringly unsuspecting.

It is not only Epstein’s theory that is blown out of the water by Mailer’s Russian research (or, to be more precise, by the research of Mailer’s team of researchers, who seem to have supplied him with nearly everything he knows) but the theories of hundreds of conspiratorial speculators who have found cabalistic signs of intrigue in every alleged detail of Oswald’s stay in the Soviet Union. And when Mailer takes the story to America, leading us “kaleidoscopically,” as he puts it, out of Oswald’s meticulously examined marriage and his frenetic activities right up to the murder, he demolishes (as have others before him) many of the major theories of the conspiracists.

Aficionados will appreciate the significance of Mailer’s (always hedged, but palpable) conclusions that Oswald probably had no significant contact with David Ferrie (a key player in most scenarios) or with the Mob; that he had no contact with anti-Castro Cubans except those he himself intentionally staged for his own singular reasons; that speculations involving Guy Bannister and George DeMohrenschildt finally lead nowhere; that whether or not rogue elements in the CIA and/or rogue elements in the FBI contemplated using him for their roguish purposes, he was always his own man, himself using them, if indeed there was an actual “them”; that there is nothing suspicious about the failure of the Dallas police and other inquisitors to tape-record Oswald’s inter-

Mr. Cohen’s essay “Yes, Oswald Alone Killed Kennedy” appeared in *Best American Essays*: 1993.

rogation after the arrest; that the famous photographs of Oswald armed with rifle and pistol and holding copies of the Trotskyist *Militant* and the Communist *Daily Worker* are not forgeries created to frame him.

I particularly admire Mailer's sweet appreciation of Ruth Paine, Marina's magnificent friend, who, logically, must be a sinister player in any theorized conspiracy. It was on her initiative that Oswald got the job at the Book Depository, from which he killed the President. (Actually, Oswald took the job three weeks before the decisions were made that brought the President to the doorstep of his assassin.) If Ruth Paine is noble beyond peradventure or suspicion (which is how Mailer portrays her) a major link in the narrative chain leading to an alleged conspiracy is severely weakened.

Why then does Mailer seem so reluctant to highlight his most potent finding: that one man, Oswald, an isolated little titan, did it all? Annoyingly, he constantly waffles, maintaining deniability like some cautious President, dallying with familiar conspiracy conjectures only to then worm out of them.

Furthermore, why does he profess admiration for views of the assassination diametrically opposite to his own—such as Epstein's, and Carl Oglesby's "brilliant" theory of a *coup d'état* considerably more convoluted than the one posited by Oliver Stone? Thus Mailer subtly denigrates the secondary sources that buttress his own conclusions and from which, indeed, he has openly appropriated (and paid for!) nearly every factual detail, gobs of prose, and many of the interpretations in his account of Oswald in America. For instance, he accepts every detail of Gerald Posner's meticulous demonstration (in *Case Closed*) that Jack Ruby could not have been party to a conspiracy to kill Oswald and then, with an ingenuity rivaling that of the O. J. Simpson defense team, wrenches those very facts into a *tour de force* of conspiracy speculation in which he claims that Ruby might still have been under Mob orders to rub out Oswald (the Mob having mistakenly assumed that the killing had been arranged by some rogue element of itself), that Ruby ran away from those do-it-or-else orders, and that he then fatalistically obeyed them when, against all reasonable expectations, he accidentally bumped into Oswald.

And, of course, there is the now

obligatory trashing of the Warren Commission. Mailer does not have the decency to ponder why the conclusions of the Warren Report, in the big picture, are very similar to his own.

The most important explanation of these annoying features is Mailer's idea of the role of the novel and of himself as novelist. Throughout his career, Mailer has affected the Emersonian stance of the "transparent eyeball," the great-souled writer through whom radiate all the contradictory currents of his Age, and who, therefore, need only consult the encyclopedia of his own protean Self to understand and to convey the world.

Moreover, notwithstanding his remarkable ability to imbibe and render huge amounts of technical and detailed information, Mailer basically has little respect for the independent power of factual truth, as he openly proclaims several times in *Oswald's Tale*: "There are no facts—only the mode of our approach to what we call facts." I was astonished by his cavalier dismissal of the question of how many assassins were firing at Kennedy as irresolvably complex, when one would think that a substantial part of his thesis depended on a clear answer to that, as a matter of fact, very answerable question.

For Mailer it is not the historians and scientists who can instruct us on these matters, but the literary artists, who command solely by the capacity of their tales to inspire imaginative assent. There are no "solutions" to the mysteries of life and history, only narrative explorations. Epstein and Oglesby then aren't really "wrong": they are artistic colleagues. (But then neither would the Warren Commission be wrong, and Mailer's criticism that it failed to study the matter deeply enough to resolve the mystery is made in bad faith.)

ONE wishes Mailer had said frankly what Don DeLillo said in his novel about Oswald, *Libra*: "Because this book makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, apart and complete, readers may find refuge here." But Mailer's is a far grander literary conceit: he propounds the preposterous notion that the nation has gone into spiritual decline because no artist-king has given it a myth of its loss in which the magnitude of the soul of the killer matches that of his victim:



"So long as Oswald is a petty figure, a lone twisted pathetic killer who happened to be in a position to kill a potentially great President . . . America is cursed with an absurdity." "Historical absurdity . . . breeds social disease." If he can make his novelistic account succeed, by a kind of sheer artistic will-to-power, America will be rescued—by Norman Mailer, would-be artistic prime minister of the world.

Again Mailer is tilting here against the Warren Commission, and assuming a single assassin. But a graver mythic challenge comes from the camp of the conspiracists, who propose a much punier Oswald and a universe of far more pungent absurdities. DeLillo, who found in the assassination of Kennedy exemplification, if not precisely verification, of the fictional world he had constructed in all his previous work, is the deeper rival.

In this version, the President was finally killed by a concatenation of plots, all of which, as in many DeLillo novels, turn out differently from the way they were originally intended. Indeed the very notion of realized intention is anathema here. A rogue element of the CIA, angry at a Kennedy who has abandoned his efforts to depose or assassinate Castro, plans an *unsuccessful* assassination attempt which will be accompanied by bogus proofs that Castro has tried to kill our President. The nation's zeal to remove Castro will be rekindled. Needed are gunmen to enact the *mock* assassination and to escape. And that brings the rogue element into contact with other on-going conspiracies: anti-Castro fanatics in New Orleans, right-wing Kennedy-haters, Mafia types.

Then a rogue element of the rogue element decides that it will not be enough that the mock assassins shoot and escape—a would-be assassin, a patsy, should be caught.

Enter Oswald. He is the quintessential figure in a DeLillo novel: a plaything of mysterious forces that have incoherently shaped his life, protean in his susceptibilities, and miraculously appropriate for the job. The "deep coincidences," as DeLillo terms them, and the plot twists metastasize.

DeLillo's lesson is this: We are all helpless patsies, buffeted by unfathomable systems upon systems. We are left with the bottomless suspicions of the public paranoid who avers, as one of

the voices in *Libra* puts it, that "something else, something that jerks you out of the spin of history," is behind everything.

As we have seen, Mailer is not entirely free of this post-modern fustian. But when his book is most what it is striving to be, it presents a refreshingly old-fashioned countermyth to the conspiracists—again, an Emersonian countermyth, of history made by singular intention and triumphant effectiveness. His Oswald is entirely his own man, and the assassination is entirely his doing. Effectively summarizing the best that has been learned and said about Oswald—his savage marriage, his waxing and waning sexuality, his possible homosexuality, his quotidian fecklessness, his rages and brutality, his tenderness, his monstrous mother, his overweening resentment, his utter isolation—Mailer draws a beautifully nuanced, touchingly human being. Oswald's dyslexia has been written of before, but no one has conveyed the metaphor of private eloquence within public bumbling to such powerful effect. Mailer's Oswald is, of all things, highly intelligent, even something of an intellectual, as we are convinced by the author's clever decoding of Oswald's dreadfully spelled and ungrammatical prose.

Most original of all, Mailer, as usual reminded of himself, sees the imperial passion, the titanic hubris, of Oswald's sense of his historical mission. (Oswald once told Marina that one day he would be prime minister of the world, a fact Mailer somehow missed.) Mailer sees the contingency and coincidence, too: if Oswald had succeeded in his earlier project of killing the right-wing fanatic General Edwin Walker, who, he said, was a budding Hitler; if Ruth Paine had not gotten him a job in a building right next to the President's route; if the other workers on the sixth floor had stayed there to watch the President; if Marina had not feigned another headache the night before; if Oswald had missed or only wounded the President, as Hinckley only wounded Reagan—there would have been no book, no Oswald. But on the other hand, a lesser man would not have been waiting with his rifle, would not have shot, and that imperial passion is the cause of causes; in that regard, Mailer is right on target.

However it is not countermyths in a world conveyed as mythic to its core that are needed to cure us of this assassination. Americans can survive a quotid-

ian Oswald. We can survive contingency. What is needed is artists and historians who restore confidence in a world of public fact and Aristotelian logic. A world where phony possibilities are excluded by empirical study, contradiction

is a scandal, and reasonable doubt is earned by rational analysis and is not the same as any old doubt, and imaginable possibility, no matter how brilliant. On these scores, *Oswald's Tale* fails to be what it could have been. □

## Such, Such Were the Joys

TERRY TEACHOUT

**T**HIS long-needed anthology tells one story and implies another. The first is of *The Little Magazine That Did*. The second is of all the people who read it, and what happened to them. Both are now a part of American history, though only one has been put on paper. Still, the first story is re-

*The Joys of National Review, 1955 to 1980, compiled by Priscilla L. Buckley (National Review Books, 270 pp., \$25)*

markable enough in its own right, and Priscilla Buckley tells it with put-out-more-flags panache both in her own introduction (whose only fault is that it does not so much as hint at the importance of the wonderful woman who wrote it) and in the 100,000-odd words she has chosen to represent the first 25 years of *NR*.

"NATIONAL REVIEW," she writes, "was launched to make the case for the rollback and defeat of Communism, and to wage combat with the dominant premises of the liberal establishment. Our writers aimed at those targets, most of the time, and were at their best when scoring against them." Most of the time, mind you: there are many lovely pieces in *The Joys of National Review* related only peripherally to the continuing struggle. I like to think Nika Hazelton's "Delectations" columns were "conservative" in some vaguely Oakeshottian sense, but I wouldn't want to make the case in court.

Nevertheless, *NR* has always been primarily a political magazine—or, more precisely, a fortnightly treatise on applied philosophy. In his foreword, the late William Rickenbacker put it neatly:

It was almost forty years ago and we were young and full of beans and really didn't give a tinker's dam about anything or anybody except maybe our souls and the relation between them and the Mind of God and also maybe the almost equally sa-

cred duty we felt to shake up an Establishment besotted and far gone in statism, sober it up, wipe the drivell off its face, and return it to navigating the good straight course laid out by those heroes, our Founding Fathers.

That sums up NATIONAL REVIEW about as well as the English language permits. In the eyes of the liberal establishment circa 1955, James Burnham was an apostate, Russell Kirk an eccentric, Willmoore Kendall a private joke, and Whitaker Chambers the Risen Antichrist. It was William F. Buckley Jr. who figured out how to cram them all into the same magazine with a minimum of bloodshed; who understood that America was full of frustrated men and women looking for an act of political self-definition more profound than voting for Ike and Dick; and who knew by instinct that a philosophy that has no room for laughter is not worthy of the name.

The fruits of his labors are sampled in *The Joys of National Review*, and I can't imagine a better pick of the litter. Different, yes: anyone with a good memory will have plenty of candidates for Volume Two. But Priscilla Buckley has sifted through all those bound volumes with unerring taste. Here is James Burnham on Eleanor Roosevelt: "At her macrocosmic level Mrs. Roosevelt makes all the world her personal slum; and on her flat-heeled shoes she charges her humorless way across oceans and continents as a lesser social-service lady pounds the sidewalks of Chicago's South Side or New York's Tenth Avenue." Here is Willmoore Kendall on diplomacy: "The ideal contemporary American ambassador is a man who flies abroad for the harm of his country." Here is Bill Buckley on the death of Evelyn Waugh: "Waugh got the best of the modern world, but paid a high price

*Mr. Teachout writes about music for Commentary. His latest book is A Second Mencken Chrestomathy (Knopf).*

# Beyond Myth. Beyond Murder.

“America’s largest  
mystery has  
found its greatest  
interpreter.”

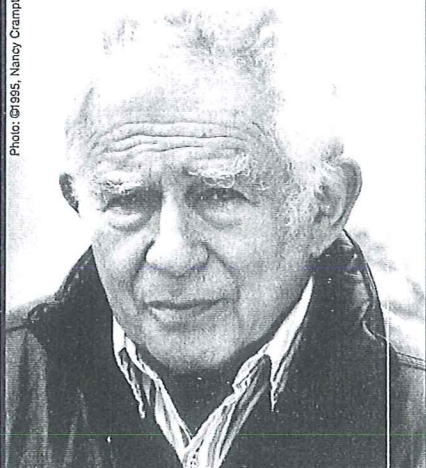
— *The Washington Post*  
*Book World* (front page)

*Vanity Fair* 9/95

“Real inspiration  
and breathtaking  
shrewdness.”

— *Time Magazine*

Photo: ©1995, Nancy Crampton



## NORMAN MAILER

### Oswald's Tale

AN AMERICAN MYSTERY



RANDOM HOUSE

with her unconscious daughter. She writes of her own Chilean childhood, the violent death of her uncle, Salvador Allende, and the family's flight to Venezuela from the oppressive Pinochet regime. Allende explores her relationship with her own mother, documented in the hundreds of letters they exchanged since she left home. Allende later married—and divorced—an undemanding and loyal man and became a fierce feminist, rebelling against the constraints of traditional Latin American society. Eventually, hope waning, Allende and her son-in-law take the comatose Paula to California, where the author lives with her second husband. The climactic scenes of Paula's death in the rambling old house by the Pacific Ocean seem to take place in another time and space. Only a writer of Allende's passion and skill could share her tragedy with her readers and leave them exhilarated and grateful. *QPB selection.* (May)

**FYI:** Paula will launch the HarperLibras Spanish imprint.

**OSWALD'S TALE: An American Mystery**

*Norman Mailer.* Random, \$30 (896p) ISBN 0-679-42535-7

Mailer opines that Lee Harvey Oswald was a sincere Marxist, a nihilist and an inveterate liar who was motivated to assassinate John F. Kennedy in order to shake up the world, to create the conditions for a new kind of society superior to American capitalism or Soviet-style communism. Oswald, he suggests, was quite possibly the lone gunman, or at least may have thought he was—in Mailer's scenario, there may have been other assassins present, unbeknownst to Oswald, conspirators working for some other group. His (unconvincing) analysis emerges from a labyrinthine pastiche of KGB and FBI transcripts, recorded dialogues, speculations, Oswald's letters and diary excerpts, and government memos.

Mailer interviewed Oswald's widow, Marina, and also spent months in Minsk interviewing Oswald's Russian acquaintances and co-workers as well as KGB officers. Pretentiously applying the novelistic techniques used to better effect in *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer ploddingly recreates Oswald's day-to-day existence in the Soviet Union, then in New Orleans and Dallas in the months leading up to Kennedy's assassination. He hypothesizes that Oswald was a provocateur playing a double-edged game with the U.S. and Russian intelligence communities to further his own self-styled mission. *Author tour.* (May)

☆ **HIDDEN TREASURES REVEALED: Impressionist Masterpieces and Other Important French Paintings Preserved by the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg**

*Albert Kostenevich.* Abrams, \$49.50 (272p) ISBN 0-8109-3432-9

An astonishing feast of unknown masterpieces, this glorious album is a historic event that deepens our understanding of modern art. It documents an exhibition at Russia's Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, unveiling a large trove of French impressionist and post-impressionist paintings—by Monet, Renoir, Matisse, Pissarro, Degas, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Manet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, etc.—whose existence had been a carefully guarded secret for half a century. The paintings were seized from German private collections during WW II and transferred to the Hermitage's storage rooms. Many of these works have never been exhibited before, even in prewar times. Among the 74 full-page color plates are Van Gogh's psychologically charged *White House at Night*, painted six weeks before his death; Degas's *Interior with Two Figures*, a symbolic drama of alienation between the sexes; vibrant pictures made in Tahiti by Gauguin; and canvases by Daumier, Delacroix, Edouard Vuillard, André Derain. Kostenevich, a Hermitage curator, has provided an extensive commentary on each picture. *BOMC main selection.* (May)

**THE HITE REPORT ON THE FAMILY: Growing Up Under Patriarchy**

*Sheri Hite.* Grove/Atlantic, \$22 (448p) ISBN 0-8021-1570-5

Hite's latest sex report, based on some 3000 questionnaires completed by children and adults in 16 countries (50% from the U.S.), focuses on the child's developing psychosexual identity and the impact of this process on adulthood. Her guiding theme is that the patriarchal family is outmoded, sexist and authoritarian and suppresses openness between children and parents about the body. Unlike critics who decry a breakdown of the traditional nuclear family, Hite argues that the rise of diverse new family structures signals a democratizing of the family and a growing concern for women's and children's rights. Her respondents' testimonies, organized around specific themes, touch on all manner of taboo subjects (e.g., the link between childhood spankings and adult sadomasochistic fantasies; parents' erotic feelings for their children; sexual play between boys). For most children, Hite claims, growing up in single-parent families is beneficial, par-

ticularly for boys raised by their mothers. A manifesto masquerading as a scientific report, her in-depth, unusually frank survey gives voice to some of the most closely guarded secrets and feelings of women, men, girls and boys struggling to define themselves sexually. *50,000 first printing; first serial to Ms. (March-April cover story); author tour.* (May)

**IN THE TIME OF THE AMERICANS: FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Marshall, MacArthur—The Generation That Changed America's Role in the World**

*David Fromkin.* Knopf, \$30 (640p) ISBN 0-394-58901-7

Inspired by President Woodrow Wilson's idealistic internationalism, three subsequent U.S. presidents—Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower—steered Americans away from isolationism to support an active, major role for the U.S. on the world stage. Under their leadership, America helped defeat Hitler, waged a Cold War against Soviet tyranny and checked Chinese communist aggression in Korea. Fromkin's dramatic, engaging political, military and diplomatic history yokes FDR, Truman and Ike in a group portrait with George Marshall, architect of America's postwar financial program to reconstruct Western Europe, and General Douglas MacArthur, WW II hero and commander of U.S. and U.N. forces in Korea. In a panoramic canvas peopled by George Kennan, Joseph Kennedy, John Foster Dulles, Felix Frankfurter, William Randolph Hearst and many others, Fromkin (*A Peace to End All Peace*) argues that America, acting with mixed motives but without imperial designs, opposed Europe's imperialisms, whether British, German, French or Soviet, and played a key role in destroying them. Fromkin is a Boston University professor of international relations, history and law. (May)

**"SPOTTED DICK, S'IL VOUS PLAIT":**

**An English Restaurant in France**

*Tom Higgins.* Soho (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, dist.), \$22 (256p) ISBN 1-56947-032-4

The idea of a restaurant specializing in English food was a joke to the people of Lyons, gastronomic center of France. Typified by overcooked meats and vegetables, soggy puddings and revolting jellies, English food was not dignified as a cuisine at all by the Lyonnais. But Higgins and his wife, Sue, loved the city and, having always wanted to run a restaurant, ignored all warnings and found a house in a low-rent section of town, where they lived

## BOOKS OF THE TIMES

*Oswald and Mailer: The Eternal Basic*

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

Even though more than 2,000 books have already been written about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the prospect of reading a new one about Lee Harvey Oswald seems intriguing — if the author is Norman Mailer. The topic, after all, looks like the perfect magnet for all the author's talents and preoccupations. What Mr. Mailer calls "the greatest mountain of mystery in the 20th century," not only offers him another opportunity to fulfill what he once called his need "to speak to one's time," but also serves as a dark mirror of the themes he has addressed throughout his 47-year-long career: the confluence of psychic and social disorder, the anarchic consequences of violence, and the relationship between a self-declared outlaw and the status quo.

In the course of "Oswald's Tale," Mr. Mailer explains to the reader exactly what he hopes to do. By probing the life and character of Lee Harvey Oswald, he says, he hopes to understand him, and in doing so, "come to the end of an ongoing question: Did Oswald kill President Kennedy? And, if so, did he do it on his own or as part of a conspiracy?"

Oddly enough, there is both too little and too much of Mr. Mailer in "Oswald's Tale." Much of this cumbersome volume consists of little but excerpts from earlier books and studies, cut and pasted together into an awkward collage. At the same time, Mr. Mailer declines to use his enormous gifts as a reporter and novelist to create an unvarnished portrait of his subject (the way he did with Gary Gilmore in his 1979 masterpiece, "The Executioner's Song"), but instead clumsily tries to force his material into an unyielding cookie-cutter shape. The result is a book that succeeds simultaneously in being boring and presumptuous, derivative and solipsistic.

It takes Mr. Mailer nearly 800 pages to complete his examination of Oswald's character, and by the end of the book, he has turned — or tried to turn — his subject into a typically Maileresque hero: a visionary (if highly deluded) malcontent whose only fealty is "to himself and to his own ideas," a man obsessed with proving his own manhood and convinced "that he has the makings

### Speculation under the protection of 'he had to feel' or 'it is possible.'

of a great leader." In short, Mr. Mailer has created a close relative of Stephen Rojack in "An American Dream" and of the hipster in "The White Negro" who knows that "if the fate of 20th-century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey with the rebellious imperatives of the self."

Mr. Mailer also concludes "that Lee had the character to kill Kennedy and that he probably did it alone," that "it is too difficult, no matter how one searches for a viable scenario, to believe that others could have chosen him to be the rifleman in a conspiracy."

Despite the proliferation of conspiracy theories over the years (the C.I.A. did it, the Mafia did it, etc.), this observation is hardly new. The much-debunked Warren Commission came to more or less the same conclusion over three decades ago, and Gerald Posner's 1993 book "Case Closed," which similarly zeroed in on Oswald's character, made a powerful case for the same.

Indeed, much of "Oswald's Tale" amounts to a tiresome rehashing of familiar details and arguments. The first half of the book, which is devoted to the two and a half years Oswald lived in the Soviet Union (from 1959 to 1962), sprang, Mr. Mailer says, from "an offer from the Belarus K.G.B. to allow a look into their files on Oswald," and from a desire to take advantage of the loosening of cold war tensions, which might incline former friends and colleagues in the Soviet Union to talk freely.

This section of "Oswald's Tale" is told in eccentric, pared-down English that is supposed to provide a kind of stylistic equivalent to Rus-

sian (much the way the flat, uninflected prose of "The Executioner's Song" evoked the idiom of the Western United States), and it provides a finely nuanced portrait of daily life in the Soviet Union during the Khrushchev era. But it does little to add to our understanding of Oswald, who remains something of a black hole in his one-time associates' recollections. The major revelations about his years in the Soviet Union (that the K.G.B. monitored his daily activities, that K.G.B. officials say they never regarded him as a potential operative and in fact initially suspected him of spying for the United States) were laid out as long ago as November 1991, when ABC's "Nightline" broadcast a special report on Oswald's K.G.B. files, and they were amplified further by Mr. Posner's book, which drew on interviews with the famous K.G.B. defector Yuri Nosenko.

In the second half of "Oswald's Tale," the material Mr. Mailer presents grows even more familiar. Indeed, whole sections here are quotations from earlier books. There are long sections from the Warren Commission's 26-volume report, long citations from Priscilla Johnson McMillan's 1977 biography of the Oswalds, "Marina and Lee," and even a couple of quotes from Mr. Mailer's own novel "Harlot's Ghost." In several chapters, Mr. Mailer observes, "there will be no more demand on the author than to serve as a literary usher who is there to guide each transcript to its proper placement on the page." This scissors-and-glue job, however, has also been heavily embroidered with Mr. Mailer's own speculation about



## Questions

Oswald and his drives, ambitions and motives — speculation that grows increasingly elaborate as the book plods wearily toward its end.

Some of this speculation is harmlessly looney, such as Mr. Mailer's contention that high K.G.B. officers tend to look like American intellectuals. Other passages, however, ominously recall the irresponsible techniques pioneered by Joe McGinniss in "The Last Brother," relying heavily on phrases like "there is a real chance," "he had to feel," "we have to entertain the possibility" "it is possible" and "it is far from wholly improbable."

Mr. Mailer writes that "a physical resemblance" between Oswald and Hitler "had to be, consciously or unconsciously, in Oswald's mind," that "one need only pencil in a mustache on any photograph of Oswald in profile to feel the force of the resemblance."

In another chapter that recounts the mysterious death of a fellow marine during Oswald's time in the service, Mr. Mailer notes that Martin Schrand "could have been killed by a Filipino," but portentously adds, "If it was Oswald, however — and let us assume that the probability of that has to be small but not inconceivable — then what a sense he would have had thereafter of being forever an outlaw, an undiscovered and as yet unprosecuted criminal."

There is little effort in such passages to find and evaluate discernible facts; rather, Mr. Mailer willfully veers even further into the realm of imaginative fancy than Don DeLillo did in his powerful 1988 Oswald novel "Libra." Playing his time-hon-



Associated Press

Lee Harvey Oswald

### OSWALD'S TALE An American Mystery

By Norman Mailer

\$28 pages. Random House. \$30.

ored games with labeling, Mr. Mailer still coyly insists that "Oswald's Tale" is "most certainly not fiction." The book, he argues, can be seen "as a special species of nonfiction that can be put under the rubric of *mystery*."

"That," he goes on, "is because all means of inquiry have to be available when one is steering one's way through a cloud — especially if there are arguments about the accuracy of the navigating instruments, which in this case are the facts."

By the end of the narrative, as Mr. Mailer sums up the fateful events of Nov. 22, 1963, he tries to enter Oswald's mind. "Oswald may never have read Emerson," he writes, "but the following passage from

'Heroism' gives us luminous insight into what had to be Oswald's opinion of himself as he sat on the sixth floor waiting for the Kennedy motorcade — he was committing himself to the most heroic deed of which he was capable." Mr. Mailer then proceeds to quote a long passage from Emerson that begins: "Self-trust is the essence of heroism. It is the state of the soul at war, and its ultimate objects are the last defiance of falsehood and wrong, and the power to bear all that can be inflicted by evil agents."

Elsewhere in this volume, Mr. Mailer refers to the "tragedy" of Lee Harvey Oswald and his "long and determined dream of political triumph, wifely approbation and high destiny." In the end, such efforts to dress a man — who by most other accounts was a small-time, troubled loser — in the garments of heroism not only seem like a perverse misreading of a historical personage but also reflect an unwillingness (not unlike that displayed by conspiracy theorists) to acknowledge the possibility of historical absurdity and random disorder.

As Mr. Mailer himself writes in this long-winded and ultimately superfluous book: "If a figure as large as Kennedy is cheated abruptly of his life, we feel better, inexplicably better, if his killer is also not without size. Then, to some degree, we can also mourn the loss of possibility in the man who did the deed. Tragedy is vastly preferable to absurdity. Such is the vested interest that adheres to perceiving Oswald as a tragic and infuriating hero (or, if you will, anti-hero) rather than as a snarling little wife abuser or a pat-sy."

## HISTORY

### ON OSWALD'S TRAIL

BY LANCE MORROW

At the age of 72, Norman Mailer still rocks back and forth on the balls of his feet when he talks. He still leaves the impression of a compact nuclear device as drawn by Herblock -- shaking slightly on its launch pad, Yoda-shaped and oracular, although somewhat mellowed by the years. He is capable now of an occasional shrug that says, 'Who knows?'

Mailer admirably settled in years ago for the literary long haul. Whatever momentary noise he made as the Tasmanian devil of American letters (when he would go dervishing through the culture, talking tough, chewing the furniture), his 27 books have drawn a permanent and distinctive trajectory. His obsessions usually lead back into the continuum of the 1950s and '60s, into the universe of the cold war, of media metastasis and dangerous fame, of glamorous, conspiratorial violence, of the garish existential dreads and lusts (to use the old hyperthyroid Mailer vocabulary) that it has been his gift to conjure up.

In *Harlot's Ghost*, published in 1991, Mailer embarked upon a sort of Moby Dick of the Central Intelligence Agency, with a volume that ran to more than 1,300 pages. A second installment is in progress. Meantime, the industrious Mailer offers *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (Random House; 828 pages; \$30), a kind of nonfiction psychobiography in which he turns his novelist's imagination to the '60s origin myth, John Kennedy's assassination. *Oswald's Tale* can be judged as investigative journalism or as literature. On either count a fair judgment would be favorable, though mixed. Sunshine and clouds. As in much of Mailer's work, moments of real inspiration and breathtaking shrewdness have been crowded into the same packing case with filler and plodding and, now and then, the sheer bull of a transcendent blowhard.

'The intent of *Oswald's Tale*,' Mailer explains modestly enough, 'is not to solve the case -- that's beyond my means -- but to delineate for the reader what kind of man he was (that is to say, what kind of character Oswald would be in a novel) and thereby enable the reader to start thinking about which plots, conspiracies or lone actions Oswald would have been capable of, as opposed to all the ones he would never fit.'

Working with Lawrence Schiller, the investigator and literary operator, Mailer spent six months in Minsk and Moscow interviewing friends and co-workers who knew the American defector in 1959 and the early '60s, when he worked unhappily in a Soviet radio plant and courted and married Marina Prusakova. Mailer and Schiller also interviewed some of the KGB agents who had the stupefying work of following Oswald around, and they read the KGB transcripts from the electronic bugs installed in the Oswalds' Minsk apartment -- the intimacies and banalities of quarreling newlyweds. ('Wife: ((yells)) ... I'm not going to cook. L.H.O.: You could make cutlets, put on water for tea. I mean, I bought everything, everything.')

Mailer's accomplishment -- and it is, after all, the purpose he set for himself -- is to turn Oswald, that historical smudge, into a troubled, touching human being, rounded and vulnerable and ultimately, Mailer thinks, fatally grandiose: a nut case and nonentity with Hitler-scale dreams. There is perverse American poignancy in the newlyweds' Minsk days, when Lee dreamed of having a son, to be named David, who would grow up to be President of the U.S.

Unfortunately, Mailer labors through 344 pages of the Minsk saga at a Volga boatman's pace, relentlessly reproducing the numerous Russian voices and lives that his tape recorder vacuumed up.

Then, as Oswald returns to the U.S. with his bride and new baby, Mailer increasingly asserts his own voice, with its familiar cadenced urgencies. 'Oswald had to be in a remarkable state at this point, a calm beneath agitation, as if at rest in the

vibrationless center of a dream,' Mailer writes, describing the moment just after the assassination when Oswald appeared, looking calm and unhurried, on the second floor of the Texas School Book Depository. 'For some, however, there is no greater evidence of his innocence than that he was so cool ... The only reply if one supposes that he did shoot Kennedy is that he had passed through the mightiest of the psychic barriers -- he had killed the king. It was equal psychologically to breaking through the sound barrier.'

Well, did Oswald kill Kennedy? Oliver Stone's JFK claimed, of course, that the President was assassinated by a conspiracy involving L.B.J., the Joint Chiefs, the military-industrial complex, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and, possibly, David Letterman. Mailer has some of the ambitious instincts of Herodotus, the great protohistorian, who knew that eventually historical fact goes dreaming off into myth and as such takes on a life of its own. For the record, however, Mailer's research and his shrewd eye lead him to believe, although with a provisional hedge, that Oswald did kill Kennedy and that, as the Warren Commission Report ('a dead whale decomposing on the beach') concluded, he acted alone.

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#### MAILER SAYS KGB SAW OSWALD AS BIG BUNGLER

In the Soviet Union, Lee Harvey Oswald was a klutz who couldn't shoot straight and apparently wasn't considered good spy material by the KGB, says a new article on President Kennedy's assassin.

Norman Mailer, writing in The New Yorker's April 10 issue, says the Soviets suspected defector Oswald of being a U.S. agent and kept him under surveillance when he lived there for 2 1/2 years.

Oswald returned to the United States in 1962, a year before the assassination in Dallas.

Soviet agents watched Oswald and his Russian wife Marina through a peephole in the wall of their state-assigned apartment in Minsk, Mailer writes in the magazine, which comes out Monday.

"We can say it now--there were surveillants assigned to Oswald's tails, and certain people were assigned to work with him, to become his associates and friends," the former deputy chief of counterintelligence in Minsk is quoted as saying.

Among those interviewed in Minsk was a fellow worker of Oswald in a radio factory, who said he was asked to test Oswald's interest in information about the Soviet Air Force.

"The friend also remembers that Oswald couldn't figure out how to put film in a simple Soviet camera," the article says. "The KGB noted with great interest that Oswald, a former Marine, never seemed to hit anything when he went hunting and that he didn't know how to operate a shortwave radio set."

But when Oswald was arrested for the Nov. 22, 1963, Kennedy assassination, it plunged the Soviet spy service into turmoil, Mailer writes.

The KGB officer in charge of Oswald's case file swore to superiors that no attempt had been made to recruit the eccentric American. "You can cut off my head, but not only did we not try to, the very thought did not even enter our minds," the officer said.

The former deputy chief of counterintelligence told Mailer that even though the KGB had "no data" that could have foretold Oswald's actions, Kennedy's assassination was "the worst moment of my life."

"Everybody blames me for this! It was as if I knew he would shoot," the officer said.

Mailer's article is adapted from a new book, "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery," and is based on six months of research in the former Soviet Union.

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Lance Morrow

## On Oswald's Trail

**A**T THE AGE OF 72, NORMAN MAILER STILL ROCKS BACK and forth on the balls of his feet when he talks. He still leaves the impression of a compact nuclear device as drawn by Herblock—shaking slightly on its launch pad, Yoda-shaped and oracular, although somewhat mellowed by the years. He is capable now of an occasional shrug that says, "Who knows?"

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MAILER'S OSWALD: A grandiose nonentity

News day 4/2/95

**LIZ SMITH**



## Mr. Mailer in Russia

**'M**EN ARE very simple: They just want to have sex." So says the movies' most alluring and dangerous woman, **Linda Fiorentino**, to **Tad Fields** in the current issue of *Vogue*.

And if you don't think Fiorentino is "the most," check out "The Last Seduction." Beyond belief!

\* \* \*

**THE BIG** story on newsstands this week has to be Norman Mailer's upcoming New Yorker piece, "Annals of Surveillance: Oswald in the USSR."

In this article, Mailer presents the definitive account of Lee Harvey Oswald's much-speculated-on interlude in the Soviet Union. Mailer and his colleague, **Lawrence Schiller**, spent six months in Moscow and Minsk examining newly available KGB files and interviewing dozens who knew the supposed assassin of President John F. Kennedy. Mailer not only tells us much that is fascinating and new about Oswald, but he also creates a masterly portrait of daily life in Russia under Nikita Khrushchev — a life of deprivation, stress and fear of surveillance. This riveting work is the first excerpt from Mailer's forthcoming Random House book, "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery."



Newsday File Photo / Bruce Gilbert

**Norman Mailer**  
Tracks Lee Harvey Oswald

# KGB bigs had jitters over Oswald: Mailer

NEWS WIRE SERVICES

In the Soviet Union, Lee Harvey Oswald was a klutz who couldn't shoot straight and apparently wasn't considered good spy material by the KGB, says an article on John F. Kennedy's assassin.

Author Norman Mailer, writing in *The New Yorker's* April 10 issue, says the Soviets suspected defector Oswald of being an American agent and kept him under surveillance when he lived there for 2½ years.

Oswald returned to the United States in 1962, a year before the President's murder in Dallas.

Soviet agents watched Oswald and his Russian wife, Marina, through a peephole in the wall of their state-assigned apartment in Minsk, Mailer writes in the magazine, which hits the stands today.

"We can say it now — there were surveillants assigned to Oswald's tails, and certain people were assigned to work with him, to become his associates and friends," the former deputy chief of counter-intelligence in Minsk is quoted as saying.

Among those interviewed in Minsk was a fellow worker of Oswald in a radio factory, who said he was asked to test Oswald's interest in information about the Soviet Air Force.

"The friend also remembers that Oswald couldn't figure out how to put film in a simple Soviet cam-

era," the article says. "The KGB noted with great interest that Oswald, a former Marine, never seemed to hit anything when he went hunting and that he didn't know how to operate a shortwave radio set."

But when Oswald was arrested at a Dallas movie theater on Nov. 22, 1963, the Soviet spy service was plunged into turmoil, Mailer writes.

The KGB officer in charge of Oswald's case swore to superiors that no attempt had been made to recruit the eccentric American. "You can cut off my head, but not only did we not try to, the very thought did not even enter our minds," the officer said.

The former deputy chief of counter-intelligence told Mailer that even though the KGB had "no data" that could have foretold Oswald's actions, the assassination was "the worst moment of my life."

"Everybody blames me for this! It was as if I knew he would shoot," the officer said. "You could not find one single person from Minsk who would say, 'Yes, Oswald had these intentions to go back to America and cause all this trouble.'"

Mailer's article is adapted from a new book, "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery."

The author also interviewed Marina Oswald, who says she still does not understand her late husband but remains "definitely sure he didn't do it."

# Mailer's 'Ghost' to live again

IT'S nice for Random House's Harry Evans that his wife, Tina Brown, chose to publish a chunk of Norman Mailer's upcoming book in her New Yorker this week. This is the kind of synergy Si Newhouse (who owns both outfits) likes to see.

We're not being snide, by the way. "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery" is Mailer at his reportorial best, tracking Lee Harvey Oswald's Russian years.

But to many of us, Mailer's monumental CIA novel, "Harlot's Ghost," was his greatest achievement, and we've been waiting since 1991 for him to make good on the promise at the end of that work: "To be continued."

Well, now he's ready. With the Oswald project behind him, Mailer says he's getting ready to start on the sequel to "Harlot's Ghost."

"It was too daunting a task to take up right



**MAILER: "I'm ready."**

away," Mailer says. "The Oswald book was a change of direction and now I'm ready to take up the big one."

And it will be big, maybe even more than the 1,300 pages of "Harlot's Ghost." That's one thing that has Mailer slightly concerned.

"I picked up a copy just the other day and it is quite a weight. [It weighs 4 pounds, to be precise.] You almost need a bookstand."

He hopes the sequel won't take as long as the seven years he devoted to the first part, but "it'll take what it takes."

We wanted to know why "Harlot's Ghost" hadn't been turned into a film. It has enough stories for a dozen movies.

"All the versions Hollywood planned involved killing off major characters," Mailer says. "I don't want them doing that and stopping me from writing the sequel."



# Mailer mines the world

"Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery," by Norman Mailer. Random House, \$30.

By TOM BUTLER

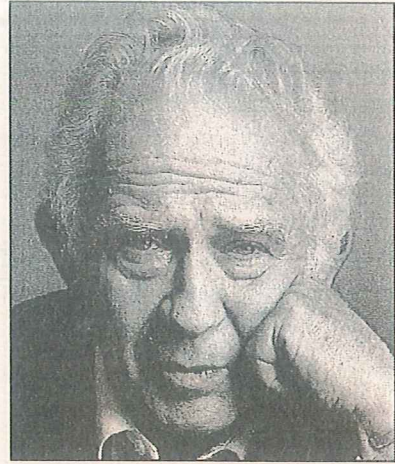
Norman Mailer got access to all the records of Lee Harvey Oswald's life in the Soviet Union from 1959 until 1962. He also traveled to Russia to interview many of the people who knew, worked with and spied on Oswald. Not surprisingly, this material constitutes the most striking part of Mailer's nonfiction effort to understand the man who killed John F. Kennedy.

What emerges is not so much an insightful exposure of the mind of the assassin as a powerful portrayal of life in a totalitarian state. The Soviet government monitored everyone during the period of Oswald's stay. They

were especially diligent with an ex-Marine who was willing to forsake the plenty of capitalist America for the cold comforts of a socialist backwater.

And Mailer found plenty of material for his book. Oswald's apartment was bugged, and the author quotes directly from the original transcripts. Many agents checked up on the American, and Mailer uses the drab bureaucratic cant of the policeman to underscore the mundane nature of Oswald's experience. Mailer also includes excerpts from Oswald's personal diary. These terse entries reinforce the myopic self-centeredness of Oswald's view of life.

This section occupies nearly half the book and creates a real flavor of the era. It also presents a very concrete portrait of the lascivious, harried woman, Ma-



Norman Mailer sifted through Soviet records of Oswald's life there.

rina, who became Oswald's wife. The author, with colleague Larry Schiller and several translators,

## THEATER

# Oswald left behind

interviewed the scores of Soviet citizens who help personalize this material. Mailer even constructs a simulated "English version of Russian" — he frequently omits articles and uses archaic constructions when recounting dialogue among Russian speakers — to further establish this mood.

For the most part, the Russian portions of the book, set in Minsk and Moscow with historical flashbacks to other areas to fill in Marina's family chronicle, make for intriguing reading. Like a good Russian novel, it is crammed with unusual characters and enigmatic thought processes. Mailer even includes a glossary of names.

The remainder of the book, the sections that deal with Oswald's personal history before Russia and with details of the fevered months before the killing, are less substantial, for obvious reasons.

Mailer relies heavily on excerpts from the reports of the Warren Commission (1964) and the House Select Committee on Assassinations (1979), and to a lesser extent on Priscilla Johnson McMillan's 1977 "Marina and Lee," Gerald Posner's "Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK" (1994) and several other books. While Mailer processes all this information through his own masterful stylistic filter, the product is very much an abridged view of well-covered ground.

There are strengths in the later sections, particularly in the depiction of Oswald's appearance on a radio talk program discussing the role of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, and the recounting of Oswald's bungled efforts to shoot General Edwin Walker, a leader in the John Birch Society. And woven throughout the tale is the

frightening picture of Oswald's mother, Marguerite, a character Mailer rightly finds worthy of Dickens.

Still Mailer makes no great revelations in the book. Despite a muddle of low-level CIA, FBI and Mafia ties to Oswald, the author ultimately applies Ockham's razor and is forced to conclude that Oswald was the man who killed Kennedy. Mailer does so with some reservations, but he clearly does so.

But Mailer's reflections on the troubled life of an overly introspective, delusional, politically confused man hardly seem worth the nearly 800 pages the author devotes to the effort.

Tom Butler is a Newark technical writer who regularly reviews books for The News Journal.

**MAILER TAKES IT ON THE CHIN:** Author Norman Mailer says he's puzzled criticism of his latest book, "Oswald's Tale." "There's been a certain animosity to the majority of the reviews that I don't understand," Mailer told the Albany (N.Y.) Times Union last week. The book chronicles the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, who was arrested for assassinating President Kennedy. Mailer said he wasn't trying to shed new light on the assassination. "I approached Oswald as a novelist and I wanted to get inside him, to understand him as a character with motives, which brings you closer to truth than a list of facts." Mailer said writing the book changed his views on the much-debated conspiracy theory. "I ended up believing Oswald probably acted alone."



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May 28, 1995

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

# Best Sellers And Bear in Mind

(Editors' choices of other recent books of particular interest)

**ATHENA**, by John Banville. (Knopf, \$22.) In this wickedly mannerist novel, a murderer turned "art expert" runs smack into his own past when he has to catalogue a batch of stolen Old Masters.

**GOD: A Biography**, by Jack Miles. (Knopf, \$27.50.) Not a joke but a scholarly, entertaining literary inquiry into the character called God as His multiple personalities have been rendered through the ages in the Hebrew Bible.

**THE HAUNTED LAND: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism**, by Tina Rosenberg. (Random House, \$25.) A moral, political and psychological investigation, by a wise journalist, of four post-Soviet societies struggling with their conduct under the old regimes.

**THE INFORMATION**, by Martin Amis. (Harmony, \$24.) Mr. Amis's cool and brilliant novel is sustained throughout by the corroding, corrupting envy of an unsuccessful novelist for a successful novelist who is also his best friend.

**THE MAN WITHOUT QUALITIES**, by Robert Musil.

Translated by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike. (Knopf, two volumes, boxed, \$60.) A magnificent new version of the unfinished and unfinishable novel by an Austrian contemporary of Proust and Joyce whose acknowledged greatness has always exceeded his acknowledged readership.

**ONE BY ONE FROM THE INSIDE OUT: Essays and Reviews on Race and Responsibility in America**, by Glenn C. Loury. (Free Press, \$25.) An African-American economist tackles race and poverty in a collection of biting pieces that emphasize black self-help while also calling on the Government to aid the nation's poor.

**OSWALD'S TALE: An American Mystery**, by Norman Mailer. (Random House, \$30.) Stoked by a passion to believe J.F.K.'s death was more than a meaningless absurdity, Mr. Mailer pursues and delivers the assassin's very slightly significant soul, using his own research and that of others.

**POPE JOHN PAUL II: The Biography**, by Tad Szulc. (Lisa Drew/Scribner, \$27.50.) Mr. Szulc, a

seasoned reporter of Polish birth, inquires into the special circumstances of Polish Catholicism and the special stresses of fascist and Communist domination that formed the present Pope.

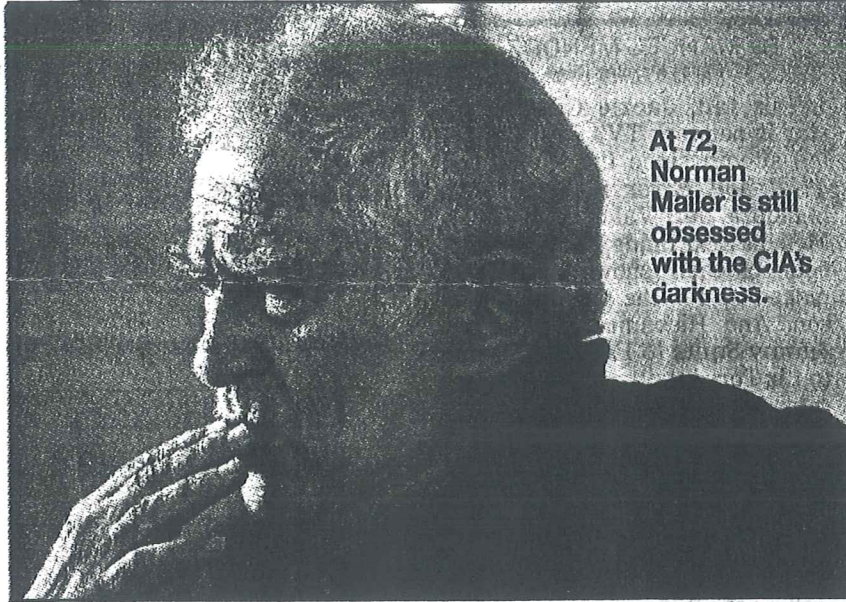
**A RIVER TOWN**, by Thomas Keneally. (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, \$24.) It's 1899 in Mr. Keneally's impassioned 21st novel, and Tim Shea, an outsider in an Australia with no insiders, inexorably digs himself into deeper and deeper trouble by always trying to do the right thing.

**RULE OF THE BONE**, by Russell Banks. (HarperCollins, \$22.) A novel that reinvigorates the Huck Finn myth in the person of Chappie, a mall rat from upstate New York who lights out for Jamaica with a runaway farm worker.

**WALT WHITMAN'S AMERICA: A Cultural Biography**, by David S. Reynolds. (Knopf, \$35.) An intensive historical excavation, aiming to show how Whitman, an enthusiast for almost everything, transmuted into his poetry images from all aspects of American culture.

# ARTS & LEISURE

Sun-Sentinel, Sunday, June 11, 1995 Section F



At 72,  
Norman  
Mailer is still  
obsessed  
with the CIA's  
darkness.

Dallas Morning News photo

## Mailer and Oswald: 'American Mystery'

By WIL HAYGOOD  
The Boston Globe

**N**EW YORK — The early morning light in Norman Mailer's Brooklyn neighborhood is up. It's clear as Whistler's. All around it's calm as Sunday.

He lives in a handsome old brownstone. There's a huge painting of Humphrey Bogart on the wall of the stairwell. Bogie at some bar, in shirt and slacks.

There's a lot of color in the painting. Norris Church Mailer, Mailer's wife, did it. It's pretty good, too.

Tough guy Bogart.

Tough guy Mailer.

On the top floor is where Mailer writes, where Mailer holds court, where the Brooklyn light warms.

Books are everywhere. There's a lot of nautical stuff. There's a hammock. And there are two mummies, one sitting, one standing. It's kind of Southern Gothic. It's kind of Disney.

Mailer's wearing a blue plaid shirt and some khakis. He's sockless. He's without a watch. He's as ruddy as any old man who has lived down by the water with the wind in his face.

He has a new book, his 28th. *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* is about the Kennedy assassination, and it's about the CIA and the FBI and secrets and shadows and darkness, and of course Lee Harvey himself. Longtime Mailer obsessions.

The century's fading, and Norman Mailer, who well might be America's last go-for-broke novelist, is 72 years old. Time

PLEASE SEE MAILER /2F

FROM PAGE 1F

## Russian sojourn provided insights into Oswald

howls. He has to spend his time and energies wisely.

He has decided to spend years and years researching and writing about the CIA and spooks and the Cold War. Now the soul of Oswald. So much darkness out there.

"I don't think he hated Kennedy," Mailer says about Oswald, pulling at the mystery. "I think he liked him."

When Mailer finished *Harlot's Ghost*, his epic CIA novel published in 1991, his friend Lawrence Schiller, who had done some documentary film work in Russia, told Mailer he could get access to KGB files on Lee Harvey Oswald. Schiller might go to Russia. "Are you game?" he asked Mailer.

It meant Norman Mailer in Russia, in Yeltsin's unpredictable Russia. But Dostoevski's Russia too.

Nearly 70 and bunking down beneath the Russian moon. In wintertime. "I had a double motive," Mailer confesses: the assassination and KGB secrets.

He didn't care about the volume of books on Kennedy and Oswald and the assassination. The joy was finding a book idea and feeling good in the chest about it. "I'm happy enough when I have a book," he says.

"My one obsession is the Kennedy assassination," Mailer adds, seated at his table, elbows squared, like a man ready to deal cards and play poker. "I've believed in a conspiracy for years."

He had never seen anything like Russia. It was dark. It snowed in the town of Minsk, where he lived, where Oswald had lived, and snowed hard. Mailer had a four-room apartment. He visited Oswald's apartment and was shocked at the smallness of it: the size of a couple prison

cells.

"It's grim," Mailer says of Minsk. "In a way it was one of the coldest places I ever lived. I was there 5½ months. I doubt there were 10 sunny days. There was a kind of bleakness. Nothing to do but work. No night life."

Old KGB agents who had spied on Oswald met with Mailer. They'd offer a little information. And they'd clam up, too: the KGB line. Russia was hard, but it was invigorating being in the land of very big shadows, enormous secrets.

Mailer feels Lee Harvey Oswald has slipped through the cracks of literary understanding.

Much is known about Oswald. He was a puny individual who had high opinions of himself. He liked books and good writing. He was a rootless man. In Texas he may have been unkindly referred to as "poor white trash."

If America wouldn't give him respect, he thought he would find it in Russia.

"Oswald is the only individual I know who, in the 20th century, lived in both countries below the level of politics, even though he was obsessed with politics," allows Mailer. "He lived as a worker in both countries. He knew both countries at ground level. The comedy of the Cold War comes through in his life."

While he was breathing, Lee Harvey Oswald fascinated few people. Mailer eyes him through his own lens.

"What fascinated me was his boldness," says Mailer. "People think of Oswald as a little nerd. Here you have a guy who, before he's 20, goes to Russia with this huge innocence and figures they'll make him a hero overnight."

Mailer doesn't come out and say it, but you can feel it, the way you can sometimes feel snow coming behind chill and grayness. There were connections in their lives.

Both men were suspicious of bureaucracies. Oswald marched



AP file photo

Lee Harvey Oswald, center, is shot by Jack Ruby, right, on Nov. 23, 1963.

**"Here you have a guy who, before he's 20, goes to Russia with this huge innocence and figures they'll make him a hero overnight."**

— Norman Mailer

on Red Square. Mailer, protesting the Vietnam War, marched on the Pentagon.

Both men wanted to write.

Lee Harvey Oswald knelt his bony legs on the floor of a Texas book depository and fired away. He couldn't write.

Mailer wrote.

Fame found both in the end. A different kind of fame for each, of course.

"He's not a likable fellow," Mailer concludes about Oswald. "He was a psychopathic liar. Liars are very bad for one's own spiritual footing. Liars make you feel you are walking in a field of snakes. But, considering he had

nothing, the guy had moxie. He goes to the Soviet Union."

Oswald thought he could take on the Russians with his youth and energy. The Russians thought otherwise. "They send him to Minsk, give him a job in a factory," says Mailer.

The days and nights are long for Oswald in Russia. He won't allow faith — in himself — to rot. "Slowly," adds Mailer, "it comes over him, he's going nowhere."

Oswald wants to return to America. He fusses with the KGB. He demands to go home. He argues with the U.S. State Department. Lee Harvey Oswald does not lack nerve.

"Here you have this kid, he takes on both departments — the State Department and the entire apparatus of the Soviet Union concerning immigration," says Mailer. "He succeeds through sheer stubbornness."

Many want to dismiss Oswald, the extra in a Shakespeare drama who bolts center stage. "People want to keep Oswald small. I don't know why," says Mailer.

It happened in a flash. An "old Negro" man later testified he saw Oswald calmly rub his hand back through his hair before firing. It was as if he was wiping away every indignity he had ever suffered. The KGB would hear about this; the CIA would hear about it.

Lee Harvey Oswald; puny no more.

Then some would-be hipster by the name of Jack Ruby comes forward and puts a bullet into Lee Harvey Oswald and Lee Harvey Oswald's life goes dark. Dropped into the shadows.

Mailer, who is "75 percent sure" Oswald killed Kennedy, believes Oswald went almost rapturously toward his date with his own defined destiny. "If he escapes he can go on and live, but no one would know about it," says Mailer. "If he's caught and stands trial he will be able to talk to the world."

■  
*Oswald's Tale.*

Mailer tales.

He was born in 1923 in Long Branch, N.J. He went to Harvard. He couldn't afford the place: "I had an uncle who had a little money who put me through."

His first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, published in 1948, was about war and blood. So he got those demons out of the way early in life. He became famous.

In 1968 he wrote *The Armies of the Night*, about the Pentagon protest the previous year. He couldn't get any more famous, but he did.

He's often referred to by his last name only. Like Garbo.

He has written enough journalism to fill a library shelf. And the 28 books. He won his first Pulitzer for *The Armies of the Night*.

He fears the future of the American novel, of readers. "The novel came into existence the beginning of the 19th century," says Mailer. "Now it's on the edge of being replaced by TV. I'm gloomy about the future of the novelist. I think me and my colleagues are the last of the Mohicans."

Among his books have been *Why Are We in Vietnam?* Also *Marilyn*, about Monroe. Critics couldn't figure that one out. He wrote *Of Women and Their Elegance*. The title explains it all. Critics really couldn't figure that one out either.

And yet it's dangerous to mock him. He can bounce back brilliantly. He won his second Pulitzer in 1980 for *The Executioner's Song*. That's the book about Gary Gilmore, the Utah murderer who went to his death by firing squad.

■  
Mailer has Hemingway's stamina, only more.

There have been six wives and nine children.

He once stabbed a lady, with a penknife.

He has directed four films. He put family and friends in the movies. They were awful. At least that's what the critics thought. But he had fun.

Mailer has long been fascinated with politics. Even obsessed.

In the 1969 New York Democratic mayoralty primary Mailer ran for mayor. Jimmy Breslin, a Mailer friend and newspaper columnist, ran for city council president. There was drinking in the evenings. OK, sometimes there was drinking in the daytime. But they got their ideas across: fairness, equality, sanity. Mailer also said something about wanting Manhattan to be named the 51st state.

Norman Mailer did not become the mayor of New York.

Politics, these days, pains Mailer. "If I was younger and stronger I'd run for higher office to get a few things said. I think the black people are going to be our Jews if we don't watch out.

"As long as the average white lives in fear of the average black, and blacks live in a state of rage, we will have an abyss that our country will sink into."

The alimony suits and court battles and many wives have given a legion of celebrity journalists clear aim at Mailer.

"It's the irony of my life that I'm considered a freak." Those are not Oswald's words; they are Mailer's, uttered two decades ago.

Still, Mailer finds his silence, gets his work done, his books written.

He appears to love, and love hugely, books and family. The dedication to his new book reads:

"To Norris, my wife, for this book and for the other seven that have been written through these warm years, these warm twenty years we have been together."

*Harlot's Ghost* stands at 1,168 pages. *Oswald's Tale* is 791 pages. But no matter. The shadows are so large. Just recently there were reports about the CIA being involved in nasty Guatemalan deeds.

And Norman Mailer is already at work on his next novel. Once again, about the CIA.

Still, so much darkness out there.

# Down Memory Lane With JFK's Assassin

By PHILIP TERZIAN

Here is an 828-page meditation on the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, the 24-year-old assassin of John F. Kennedy, written by a 72-year-old writer who is described by his publisher as America's "most distinguished novelist." I refer, of course, to the latest Norman Mailer production: "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery" (Random House, \$30).

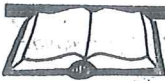
Let us try to put this in perspective. Kennedy was murdered in Dallas almost 32 years ago; Oswald, in turn, was shot and killed two days later by Jack Ruby. While Mr. Mailer declares that he began his work with "a prejudice in favor of the conspiracy theorists," by the end of his labors he reaches the same conclusion as the Warren Commission: that Oswald acted alone and that strip-joint owner Jack Ruby did too. The findings of the Warren Commission were announced in September 1964, nearly 31 years ago.

And yet, three decades later, here is "Oswald's Tale," adding a touch of literary luster to the leaden prose of the Warren Commission. It is as if, in the mid-1930s, Sherwood Anderson had written a long ruminative work on the life of Leon Czolgosz, who shot William McKinley in 1901; or William Dean Howells, at the turn of the century, had taken up the case of John Wilkes Booth, who murdered Abraham Lincoln in 1865. What is the point?

The answer is journalism—not history, or even literature. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, selected specimens of KGB records have become available to inquiring eyes, and Norman Mailer (for reasons that are never specified) was granted sole access to certain records about Oswald that were kept by the Soviet government during and after Oswald's brief Russian sojourn. Of course, we have no way of knowing how complete these records may

be, or how pointedly incomplete: Since the assassination, the KGB has sought consistently to assure the CIA and others in America that Oswald was not its agent. Indeed, the Soviets could never quite persuade themselves that Oswald was not an American plant.

On the basis of these varied documents, it is not hard to understand why the Soviets were reluctant to embrace Oswald; He was muddle-headed, unreliable and indolent. Yet from these small morsels Mr. Mailer bakes a mighty muffin. We read Oswald's dyslexic diary as he lands in Moscow, as he contemplates his place in



## Bookshelf

*"Oswald's Tale:  
An American Mystery"*  
By Norman Mailer

history, as he gripes about his job. We talk to his handlers, his translators and his sometime girlfriends, to his workmates in the factory. We are privileged to hear Lee and Marina Oswald squabbling in their Minsk apartment. ("Wife: 'So? I never washed our floors?' LHO: 'You're not a good housewife, no, not a good housewife.' Wife: 'You should have married a good one.'") We trace his boyish embrace of the Marxist vision, and his disenchantment with Soviet society.

All of this is chronicled with scrupulous faith: Mr. Mailer seems to have sought out each living Russian who came into contact with Oswald, and got him talking. And when the plot picks up on these shores, Mr. Mailer covers every inch of Oswald's pilgrimage: his desolate jobs, his squalid flats in the Texas heat, his endless correspondence with diplomats and bureaucrats.

Mr. Mailer does succeed in painting a

portrait of Oswald as he must have been: a Messianic half-wit, alienated, angry, devious, impotent, half-desperate, half-cunning, punishing his insufferable mother with his politics, grasping at power through the barrel of a gun. He draws an interesting parallel between Oswald's reflections and the musings of the youthful Hitler, whose laziness, nihilism and certain sense of destiny proved more catastrophic to the history of the world. Mr. Mailer succeeds in one important aim: Oswald, as he is drawn here, is just the sort of person who would clarify his clouded existence through violence, and choose as his target the one prominent American who seems to have enchanted his sulking, distant wife.

Yet it's still worth asking: Why go to all this trouble? In Mr. Mailer's view, it is necessary to plumb the depths of Oswald's life and disprove a conspiracy because "it is virtually not assimilable to our reason that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a nonentity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd."

This is a curious proposition for the biographer of Gary Gilmore, for someone who has sought out the soul of his country in its gutters and back alleys. The past is a puzzle and the future a mystery precisely because nonentities will strike out unexpectedly, pushing the world along accidental paths. The surprise in all this is not that the life of the glamorous John F. Kennedy was ended by the pitiful Lee Harvey Oswald, but that people like Mr. Mailer should be stunned by such caprice, and go to such lengths to arrive where they began.

*Mr. Terzian writes a column from Washington for the Providence Journal.*

copy to = H. W. L. ...

A haunting biographical masterpiece from the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Executioner's Song*

# OSWALD'S TALE

An American Mystery

BY **NORMAN MAILER**



"Judicious, painstaking and imaginative."  
—Kirkus Reviews



Above: Lee and Marina Oswald (Time Inc. Picture Collection). Above left: Norman Mailer (John Lity).

"What kind of man was Oswald?" What was his inner reality? Would we have liked him in any fashion, "can we feel compassion for his troubles, or will we end by seeing him as a disgorgement from the errors of the cosmos, a monster?" Never one to back down from controversy, Norman Mailer again breaks new intellectual ground, with *Oswald's Tale*, his utterly fascinating effort to restore to history Lee Harvey Oswald's humanity.

Was Oswald an assassin with a vision? Or merely a killer without one, a cipher? Mailer boldly opines, "The sudden death of a man as large in his possibilities as John Fitzgerald Kennedy is more tolerable if we can perceive his killer as tragic rather than absurd." And to this end, *Oswald's Tale* reveals not only conspiracy

but character. We have come, says Mailer, to "search for the nature of the man before we decide on the plot."

### Solving the Oswald enigma

In 1959, the troubled 20-year-old Oswald—an ex-Marine and fledgling Marxist ideologue—defected to the USSR and was sent by the somewhat puzzled Soviet authorities to the provincial city of Minsk, where the KGB could more easily keep an eye on him. Mailer spent six months tracing Oswald's Russian odyssey, interviewing former acquaintances and studying never-before-released KGB surveillance reports—including transcripts of secret recordings capturing Lee and his new wife, Marina, in their apartment. After Russia, Mailer follows the Oswalds and their new baby daughter back to the United States. From this point, Mailer attempts to reconstruct Oswald's early life, starting with his birth in New Orleans in 1939 and subsequent wanderings with his overweening, Dickensian mother, Marguerite. Then, searching for clues revealing motive and character, Mailer picks up Oswald's adult life again and recon-

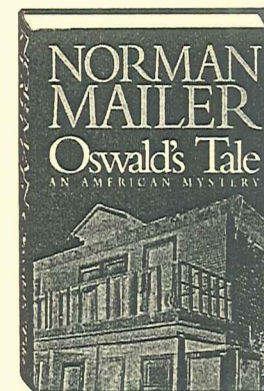
structs step by step the assassination and its aftermath. Through Mailer's careful depictions, we learn that Lee Harvey Oswald was a loner ("a cat who walked by himself," according to one Russian who knew him); that he possessed a monumental ego—Oswald considered himself "one of the principalities of the universe"; that a kindly New York social worker who met the 13-year-old Oswald—who grew up as a 1950s version of a latchkey child—said this about him: "There is a rather pleasant, appealing quality about this emotionally starved, affectionless youngster which grows as one speaks to him."

### Russian undressing

From the KGB tapes we know that Oswald and Marina fought like typical newlyweds. And in America, the squabbling became increasingly violent, with Oswald beating and punching Marina. Mailer eloquently sizes up Oswald as a man for whom "no pit was so deep ... as the abyss of unrequited love." And here, the author makes clear the human tragedy of Lee Harvey Oswald, a man harassed for his views by the intelligence services of two countries, who simply walked by everybody and shot the president of the United States—but not before leaving his wedding ring in a cup for his sleeping wife.

Conspiracy theories will still abound, but Mailer believes that Oswald almost certainly operated alone on that fateful November day in Dallas. Yet in its eerily beautiful descriptions of the assassin's solitary and elusive character, *Oswald's Tale* still manages to expose to readers many fresh vistas on a story many think they already know.

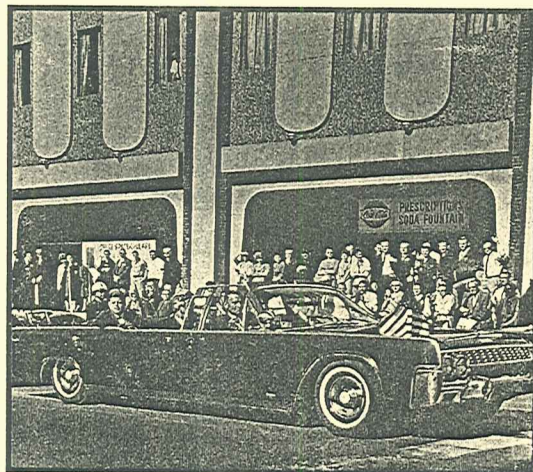
About the Author: **NORMAN MAILER** is a National Book Award winner and has twice been awarded the Pulitzer Prize. *Oswald's Tale* is his 28th book.



791 pages • 6" x 9 1/4" • notes bibliography • appendix glossary of names (Random House, \$30.00)

#18-2608

Members' Price: \$24.95



Left: President John F. Kennedy travels in his motorcade in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1961 (UPI/Bettmann).

"History Book Club Review" AUGUST 1995



# Beyond Myth. Beyond Murder.

"His finest achievement since *The Executioner's Song*...  
America's largest mystery has found its greatest interpreter."

—The Washington Post

"Breathtaking in ambition...."

—The New York Times Book Review

"Watching a major novelist wrap his  
instincts around the drab figure at  
the center of one of America's greatest  
tragedies makes a fascinating study."

—Chicago Tribune

"Constantly fascinating  
and clearly important."

—The Atlantic Monthly

"Oswald's Tale often shows [Mailer] at his best...  
reading it has many rewards."

—The New York Review of Books

"Vintage Mailer. More true-to-life than  
any fact-driven treatise could hope to be."

—The Philadelphia Inquirer

"Fascinating for every  
one of its 848 pages."

—Detroit Free Press

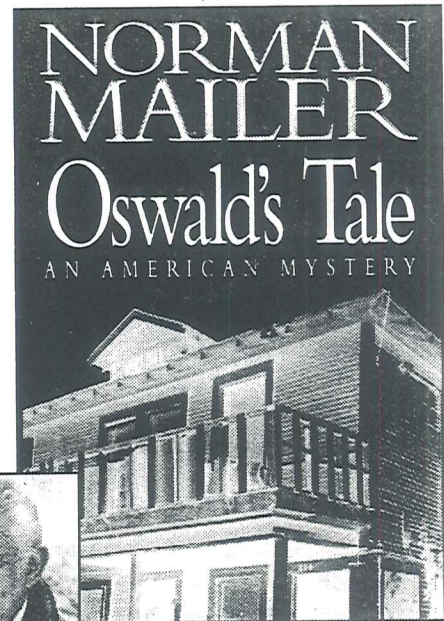


Photo ©1995, Nancy Crampton

A Main Selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club

RANDOM HOUSE

July 13, 1995 — NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS

copy to H. WESSER

# Mailer: Oswald was underestimated

continued from Page 1C.  
Oswald acted alone.

However, "it wouldn't startle me if someone came in with definitive proof that there had been a conspiracy. I'd think, 'Well, I lost one again.' But it wouldn't be stronger than that."

Beyond the evidence in the case, Mr. Mailer sees a more general problem with conspiracy theories.

"This idea that there's a plot and everything works like clockwork — I mean, anyone who has ever directed a play knows how impossible that is, and I have directed a play...."

"I have a theory that I've had for years that the only conspiracies that ever work are the ones that are misplotted. They are misplotted and a couple of people make errors and the errors happen to get them up to the right place rather than the wrong place. In other words, if you have a perfect conspiracy that should work, someone is going to make a mistake and so it'll deviate from the target.

"People who believe in large conspiracies have a desire for a perfect world. Even an evil world that's perfect is preferable to them than a chaotic world."

## KGB documentation

Mr. Mailer, investigative reporter Lawrence Schiller and interpreter Ludmila Peresvetova spent several months in Minsk in the former Soviet Union interviewing KGB officials and ordinary citizens who had known Oswald there in the early 1960s. The team also was given access to KGB documents. The first half of *Oswald's Tale* comes from this research.

For the second half of the book, devoted to Oswald in America, Mr. Mailer relied mostly on research and publications by others, especially the Warren Commission report, the Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations, Priscilla Johnson McMillan's *Marina and Lee* and Gerald Posner's *Case Closed*.

The novelist says of his research in Minsk: "We popped in at the end of the Cold War. Belarus was a new republic. It's a new era, and they're ready to talk. It was marvelous. It was like coming to some sealed vault where time had stood still. The interviews were a dream. Because after all, if you don't talk about something for 30 years, the



Marina Oswald Porter, Lee Harvey Oswald's widow, was interviewed by Norman Mailer for his new book, *Oswald's Tale*.

memory of it is going to stay as clear as yesterday."

Mr. Mailer says that immediately after the assassination of President Kennedy, the KGB, fearing that the accusations against Oswald were a provocation, ordered everyone who had known him in the former Soviet Union not to discuss the case.

As for the decision not to interview Americans except for Ms. Porter, Mr. Mailer says he felt the field had long since been exhausted. "This is a playing field that's had 42-hundred tanks and trucks going over it for 30 years, and it's almost dangerous to interview people because they won't remember what happened — they'll remember the last stories they told and the legends they built up about their participation.

"I don't mean to denigrate any of these people. If I had been in that situation, it would have happened to me. If someone interviews me about Norman Mailer, I'm the last person that should be interviewed because I have as much public-relations stuff to put out as any good business, in the sense that for years I've been obliged to talk about myself, sometimes willingly, sometimes unwillingly, and I've thought about myself so much that there's no way to assume that anything spontaneous is going to be there."

**'A bell-shaped curve'**

research: "This was a man with an enormous range of behavior. His best behavior and his opposite behavior were at the opposite ends of a bell-shaped curve. Oswald was a bell-shaped curve.

"You can't try to understand that man by saying, 'Oh, he's this or he's that,' because it just won't be true. He could be reasonably dumb on occasion, or stupid, but he could be surprisingly bright.

"For instance, when I read the transcript of his debate in New Orleans with three anti-communists, he just surprised the hell out of me. He was taken by surprise and really was astonishingly good. He could handle himself in a debate on a reasonably high level.

"He would have been at home on a fightline," Mr. Mailer says with a laugh.

Oswald's intelligence has been underestimated because he was severely dyslexic, Mr. Mailer says.

"If you read some of his dyslexic writing, he really was illiterate. And of course his writing in Russian was abominable. He was dyslexic to begin with, and even the Russians can't spell their own language unless they are extremely well-educated. His Russian was a disaster area...."

"The key thing about Oswald that people don't realize is that he did not see himself as small in any way at all. He saw himself as profoundly misunderstood by the world, but he believed he was going to be a figure of enormous power yet. It was what kept him going.

## Idea of destiny

"He had some terrible reversals in America. Whatever love there had been between his wife and himself began to fall apart. Everything got worse and worse. Nevertheless, he always had this idea of his destiny. And the irony is that indeed he had an enormous effect on American life. The country has never been the same since the assassination of JFK.

"I remember John Updike wrote years ago, about the time it happened, that he wondered whether God had withdrawn his sanction from America. I've always been haunted by those lines, because I think there was a great deal of truth in them. If you believe in God — as Updike does and as I do — and if you believe there is such a thing as God giving a special sanction to a particular country, then it could follow.

"Because after all, we are the

body have their free will more good than bad in history, is absolutely alien to the Middle Ages or the Renaissance in the Enlightenment there's a feeling that this was out of place.

"Democracy was always an extraordinary luxury, and a country might need God to sustain it."

Lee Harvey Oswald isn't a person who receives special treatment in Mr. Mailer's book. He says he feels a "grudging sympathy with Oswald's mother, Marina Oswald, who has not been treated kindly in most accounts.

"As I said in the book, I have a fondness for her in which is as a working mother who has to have to like someone who is not for you. I didn't have to like her at all about her; all I had to do was quote her in the *Warren Commission* report.

## Novelist's duty

"You know, if Dickens had created a character like that, it would have been a disaster. He would have said, 'Dickens created it again; he created this woman.' She is as true to life as Micawber or Uriah Heep. They were to themselves. They never entered a false sentence, and the rite doesn't either.

"I didn't have to do it all. All I've got to do is create a character and put what she does in proper place. You get a sense of somebody who lives that easy."

Mr. Mailer's attempt to show man qualities in Lee Harvey Oswald has disturbed some readers. He has written comments: "To sympathize for a murderer is unbalancing. Now I have sympathy for him. I do not approve of him, obviously, but there is a certain sympathy for him."

"A novelist's job is to show people that we would never comprehend. That's the novelist's duty, to show us what we would say, duties of a novelist, you know, to enlarge our vision a little bit. In the fact that I took him

"We've been living in a hole in our heads, with no content, this trivial cipher committed to rather have it be a cipher to think of and think, 'I'm a good man, but I'm lost.'

"We lost a great man, F. Kennedy, but we

## Mailer on His Ego

When Norman Mailer was on Michael Krasny's KQED radio show "Forum" to discuss his new book, "Oswald's Tale" (Random House; \$30), he stressed that Lee Harvey Oswald had an enormous ego.

"Egos are like architecture," said the author. "They're like little squalid huts or like huge skyscrapers."

"How would you describe yours?" Krasny asked him.

"Sort of like a French villa," said the shy Mailer, "with many rooms. . . . Quite spacious but with some of the rooms needing to be aired out and dusted."

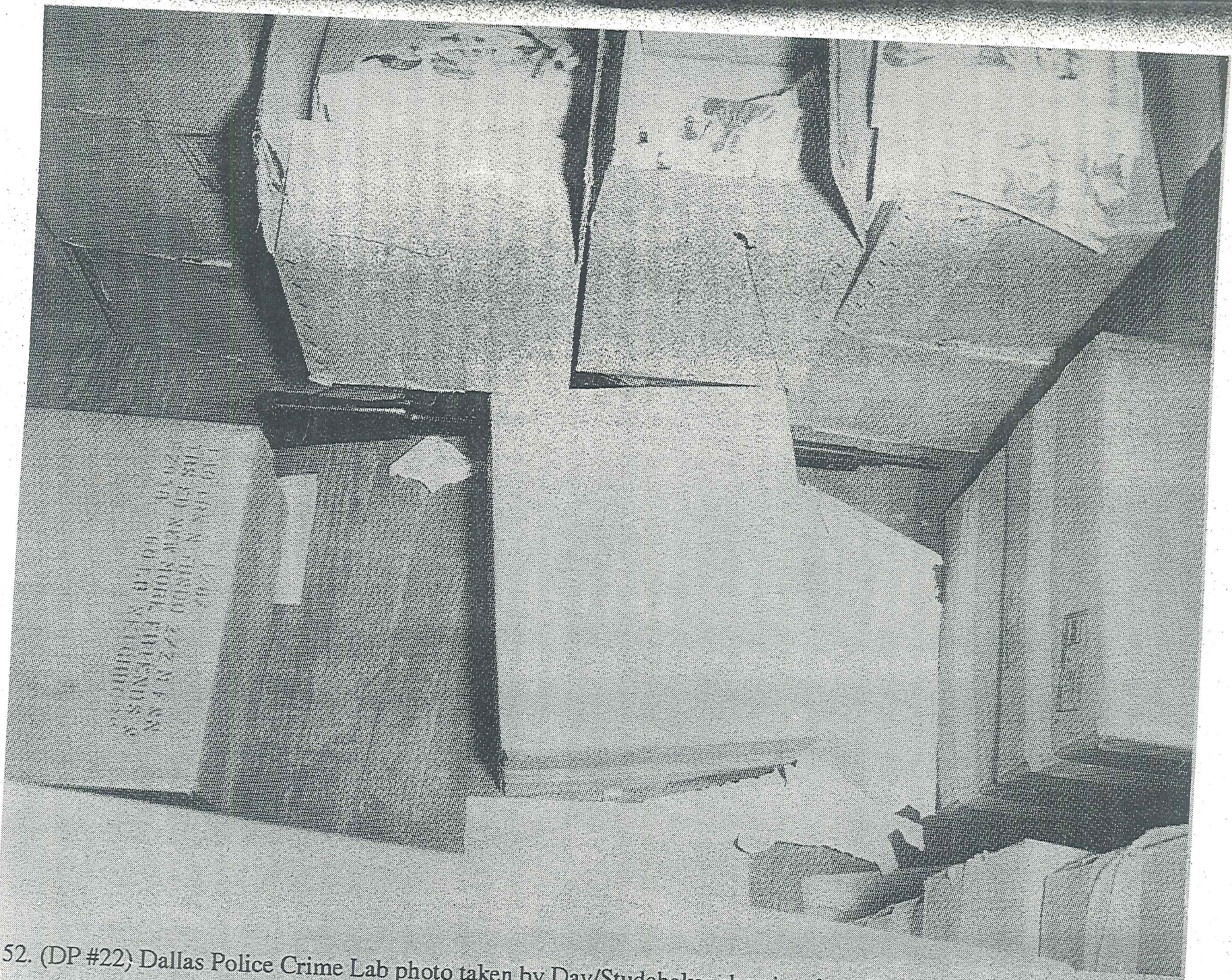
copy to = H. WELLSBERG S-F CHRONICLE - 6/28/95

PEOPLE

## THE FEATURES PAGE

PERSONALS

Leah Garchik



52. (DP #22) Dallas Police Crime Lab photo taken by Day/Studebaker showing the rifle as it was found on the floor.

4/30/95

Jefferson Morley, Outlook  
The Washington Post  
1150 15 St., NW  
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Jeff,

If the AR&B persists in its definition of assassination records to exclude what the agencies did to <sup>and about</sup> critics and criticism of the official mythology, they should be added to your Department of Secrets.

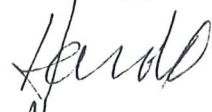
And as I think you will yet come to realise, they will have been helped in this by the nuttiness and the scrimshaw and the essentially irrelevant.

Because I cannot be at the coming hearing I've written Tom asking that my belief be incorporated in the record of that hearing. It is already <sup>at</sup> length and with vigor in AR&B's files, which will be massive.

For the time being we'll have to ~~wait~~ <sup>await</sup> history's writing finger to learn what is right and what is not on this.

I have no doubt and I hope they change their definition.

Sincerely,

  
Harold Weisberg

By the way, as I indicated to Jeffrey and to George, I think there can be a very topical and important book that would lend itself to serialization in what I think of as "Apple Pie," with the subtitle "Violence in America." I can help with that with ~~just~~ what I know and with records. Did you know, for example, that the first humans ~~burned~~ <sup>burned</sup> in this land were Indians, burned on Cape Cod by whites- burned by the entire village?



GEORGE LANGE—OUTLINE

Mailer: 'He was a do-it-yourself guy'

## No Ordinary Secret Agent

**Books:** Mailer talks about Lee and the KGB

**N**ORMAN MAILER'S *OSWALD'S TALE: AN American Mystery* (328 pages. Random House, \$30) won't appear until early May. But The New Yorker's recent excerpt revealed new material covering JFK's supposed assassin's sojourn in the Soviet Union after his 1959 defection: accounts of Oswald the reluctant factory hand and would-be womanizer, KGB transcripts of his bugged spats with his young Russian wife. And the contrarian Mailer now agrees the Warren Commission was probably right that Oswald acted alone. Like "The Executioner's Song," Mailer's Pulitzer Prize-winning book on Gary Gilmore, "Oswald's Tale" was dreamed up by journalistic entrepreneur and world-class interviewer Lawrence Schiller, who recruited Mailer as writer. (His most recent coup: O. J. Simpson's "I Want to Tell You.") Mailer, Schiller and a team of translators and assistants spent months in the former Sovi-

et Union, amassing 11,000 pages of interviews with Oswald's associates—and KGB men who spied on him. Last week Mailer talked with NEWSWEEK's Ray Sawhill about Schiller, the KGB and Oswald. Excerpts:

**NEWSWEEK** How do you two work together?

**MAILER:** We're free to fight, which makes for good relations. Once or twice one of us would pursue a line of questioning the other hated, and we were finally screaming at each other. And the poor Russian interviewee is sitting there looking at us like we're madmen.

**How did the KGB react to Oswald?**

They were grimly fascinated—even glumly fascinated. There were so many opportunities to make a big mistake. We have this idea of the KGB as the evil empire, but that's not your typical working KGB man. They've got a family, they want to advance their career, they're as bureaucratic as we are. And they had a hell of a chestnut with Oswald. If he's CIA, he's a

most unusual agent. If he's sincere, it would be a disgrace if they treated him abominably. So they decided to observe him. The KGB are chess players. They play as much chess as the CIA plays tennis.

**Were they being straight with you?**

There was always the chance they were dissimulating. But you'd have needed a sophisticated writer to make up that legend.

**Did your book change direction?**

I started with one book and ended with another. When [our work] was all over in Belarus, I got fascinated with, of all things, the Warren Report. Not that it was a good piece of investigative reporting; it wasn't. But it's a marvelous source of minimalist stories about life in America at that time.

**And the bottom line?**

I think he did it by himself, but I think he was leaned on by the FBI and CIA, which is why there was that tremendous effort at cover-up. Oswald was a do-it-yourself guy. It's hard to see him giving his gun to someone else. It would have been like him giving his wife to someone else. ■

The Worker

SF CHRONICLE - 4/7/95

PEOPLE

## THE FEATURES PAGE

### PERSONALS

Leah Garchik

#### **Soviet Spymasters Watched Oswald**

Lee Harvey Oswald was under Soviet surveillance when he lived in Russia in the early '60s, reports Norman Mailer in a New Yorker magazine excerpt from his forthcoming book, "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery."

The former deputy chief of counterintelligence in Minsk told Mailer that the Soviets thought Oswald was a U.S. agent.

"We can say it now," said Mailer's source. "There were surveillants assigned to (tail Os-

wald), and certain people were assigned to work with him, to become his associates and friends." Oswald and his wife lived in a state-assigned apartment in Minsk; authorities watched them through a peephole in a wall.

The KGB determined that Oswald was too stupid to be enlisted as a Soviet spy. Mailer writes, "The KGB noted with great interest that Oswald, a former Marine, never seemed to hit anything when he went hunting, and that he didn't

know how to operate a short-wave radio set."

The former counterintelligence officer told Mailer that learning that Oswald had assassinated Kennedy was "the worst moment of my life" because he knew that suspicion would fall on him.

"Everyone blames me for this! It was as if I knew he would shoot. You could not find one single person from Minsk who would say, 'Yes, Oswald had these intentions.'"

at atrom of Posner

II ch 10 ↓ to 116

IV ch 2 ↓ to 358

V ch 4 ↓ to 178

↓ to 179

↓ to 177

VII ch 1 ↓ to 372

22 to 375-6

29 to 377

31 382-3

40 391

44 396-7

52 392

VIII ch 1 13/ 118



Lance Morrow

## On Oswald's Trail

**A**T THE AGE OF 72, NORMAN MAILER STILL ROCKS BACK and forth on the balls of his feet when he talks. He still leaves the impression of a compact nuclear device as drawn by Herblock—shaking slightly on its launch pad, Yoda-shaped and oracular, although somewhat mellowed by the years. He is capable now of an occasional shrug that says, “Who knows?”

Mailer admirably settled in years ago for the literary long haul. Whatever momentary noise he made as the Tasmanian devil of American letters (when he would go dervishing through the culture, talking tough, chewing the furniture), his 27 books have drawn a permanent and distinctive trajectory. His obsessions usually lead back into the continuum of the 1950s and '60s, into the universe of the cold war, of media metastasis and dangerous fame, of glamorous, conspiratorial violence, of the garish existential dreads and lusts (to use the old hyperthyroid Mailer vocabulary) that it has been his gift to conjure up.

In *Harlot's Ghost*, published in 1991, Mailer embarked upon a sort of *Moby Dick* of the Central Intelligence Agency, with a volume that ran to more than 1,300 pages. A second installment is in progress. Meantime, the industrious Mailer offers *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (Random House; 828 pages; \$30), a kind of nonfiction psychobiography in which he turns his novelist's imagination to the '60s origin myth, John Kennedy's assassination. *Oswald's Tale* can be judged as investigative journalism or as literature. On either count a fair judgment would be favorable, though mixed. Sunshine and clouds. As in much of Mailer's work, moments of real inspiration and breathtaking shrewdness have been crowded into the same packing case with filler and plodding and, now and then, the sheer bull of a transcendent blowhard.

“The intent of *Oswald's Tale*,” Mailer explains modestly enough, “is not to solve the case—that's beyond my means—but to delineate for the reader what kind of man he was (that is to say, what kind of character Oswald would be in a novel) and thereby enable the reader to start thinking about which plots, conspiracies or lone actions Oswald would have been capable of, as opposed to all the ones he would never fit.”

Working with Lawrence Schiller, the investigator and literary operator, Mailer spent six months in Minsk and Moscow interviewing friends and co-workers who knew the American defector in 1959 and the early '60s, when he worked unhappily in a Soviet radio plant and courted and married Marina

Prusakova. Mailer and Schiller also interviewed some of the KGB agents who had the stupefying work of following Oswald around, and they read the KGB transcripts from the electronic bugs installed in the Oswalds' Minsk apartment—the intimacies and banalities of quarreling newlyweds. (“WIFE: [yells] ... I'm not going to cook. L.H.O.: You could make cutlets, put on water for tea. I mean, I bought everything, everything.”)

Mailer's accomplishment—and it is, after all, the purpose he set for himself—is to turn Oswald, that historical smudge, into a troubled, touching human being, rounded and vulnerable and ultimately, Mailer thinks, fatally grandiose: a nut case and nonentity with Hitler-scale dreams. There is perverse American poignancy in the newlyweds' Minsk days, when Lee dreamed of having a son, to be named David, who would grow up to be President of the U.S.

Unfortunately, Mailer labors through 344 pages of the Minsk saga at a Volga boatman's pace, relentlessly reproducing the numerous Russian voices and lives that his tape recorder vacuumed up.

Then, as Oswald returns to the U.S. with his bride and new baby, Mailer increasingly asserts his own voice, with its familiar cadenced urgencies. “Oswald had to be in a remarkable state at this point, a calm beneath agitation, as if at rest in the vibrationless center of a dream,” Mailer writes, describing the moment just after the assassination when Oswald appeared, looking calm and unhurried, on the second floor of the Texas School Book Depository. “For some, however, there is no greater evidence of his in-

nocence than that he was so cool ... The only reply if one supposes that he did shoot Kennedy is that he had passed through the mightiest of the psychic barriers—he had killed the king. It was equal psychologically to breaking through the sound barrier.”

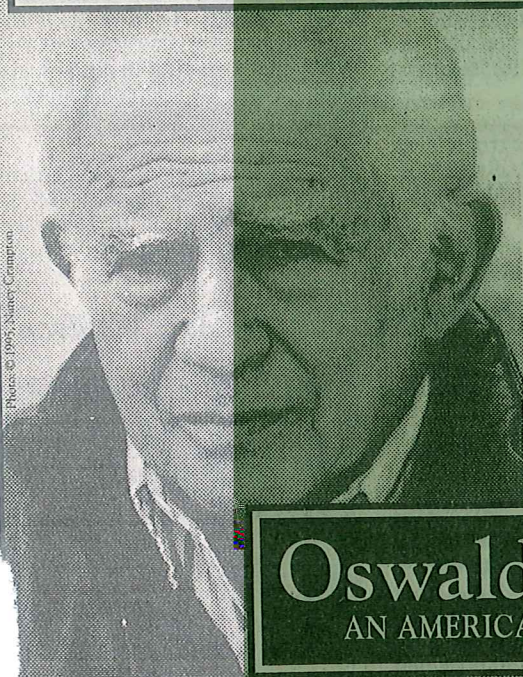
Well, did Oswald kill Kennedy? Oliver Stone's *JFK* claimed, of course, that the President was assassinated by a conspiracy involving L.B.J., the Joint Chiefs, the military-industrial complex, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and, possibly, David Letterman. Mailer has some of the ambitious instincts of Herodotus, the great protohistorian, who knew that eventually historical fact goes dreaming off into myth and as such takes on a life of its own. For the record, however, Mailer's research and his shrewd eye lead him to believe, although with a provisional hedge, that Oswald did kill Kennedy and that, as the Warren Commission Report (“a dead whale decomposing on the beach”) concluded, he acted alone. ■



MAILER'S OSWALD: A grandiose nonentity

# NORMAN MAILER

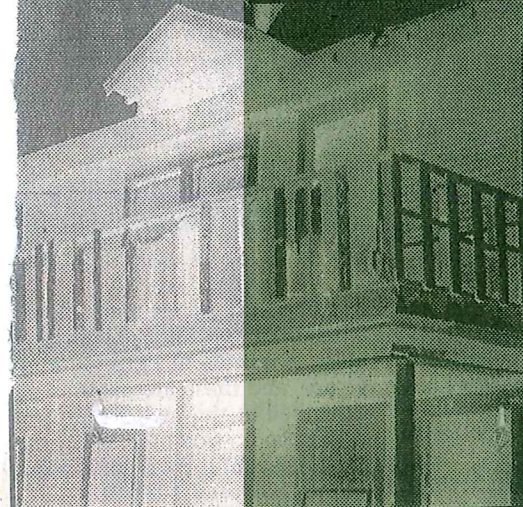
Photo © 1995, Sharyn Compston



BEYOND  
MYTH.  
BEYOND  
MURDER.  
BEYOND  
ANYTHING  
YOU HAVE  
EVER READ.

## Oswald's Tale

AN AMERICAN MYSTERY



**"Constantly  
fascinating  
and clearly important.  
Journalism at its best."**  
— *The Atlantic Monthly*

**"Magnificent."**  
— *Booklist*

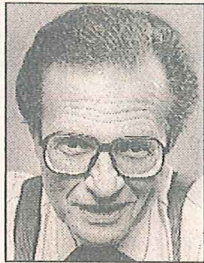
**"Mailer enters  
his subject's  
spiritual world."**  
— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

RANDOM  HOUSE

PHILA INQUIRER SUNDAY MAY 7, 1995 V13

# Different ways of seeing who has head for politics

My two cents ... I like whatever Sen. **Joe Biden**, D-Del., has done with his hair. ... Remember when all the pundits were saying that **Janet Reno** was long gone? ... **William Lashner's Hostile Witness** (HarperCollins, \$23) is one terrific read about the law. ... **Nicolas Cage**



**LARRY KING'S PEOPLE**  
**News & Views**

improves any screen he's on. ... Thunderstorms always unnerve me. ... You look up "class act" in the dictionary, you get a picture of **Michael Jordan**.

No matter what your opinion, every thinking person should read **Robert McNamara's In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam** (written with **Brian VanDeMark**, Times Books, \$27.50). ... **Bob Costas** is the best pre-game host in the business. ... **Don Shula's Everyone's a Coach** (\$22, Zondervan) is a great self-help book. ... I love the Baltimore Orioles, but those gray caps on those road uniforms are

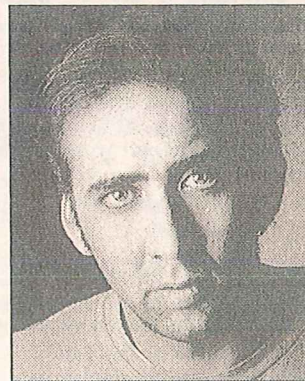
ugly. ... Others may be more gregarious and funnier, but no one is in **Pat Haden's** league as a TV football analyst. ... Why on earth would anyone want or need an assault weapon? ... **Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery** (Random House, \$30) proves again that **Norman Mailer** is a master of non-fiction. ... When you get right down to it, baseball is still the best game ever invented.

Hasn't Oklahoma Gov. **Frank Keating** become a very impressive national figure? ... If **Rush Limbaugh** gets a Republican president to go with a Republican Congress, who will he have to kick around? ... Kansas City's ballpark looks strange with real grass in it. ... If I were betting on it, I'd say **Ross Perot** gives it another shot. ... **Larry Hart**, whose centennial we celebrate this year, never wrote a corny lyric.

If **Bill Clinton** can push all

his opponents over to the far right, he'll serve eight years in office. ... There is no doubt in the world that Gov. **Christie Whitman** of New Jersey is on every Republican candidate's short list for the vice presidency. ... *The Way You Look Tonight* is one of my all-time favorite love songs. ... Age takes no toll on **Morgan Fairchild**. ... If I were starting a big league franchise, the first player I'd take would be **Frank Thomas** of the White Sox.

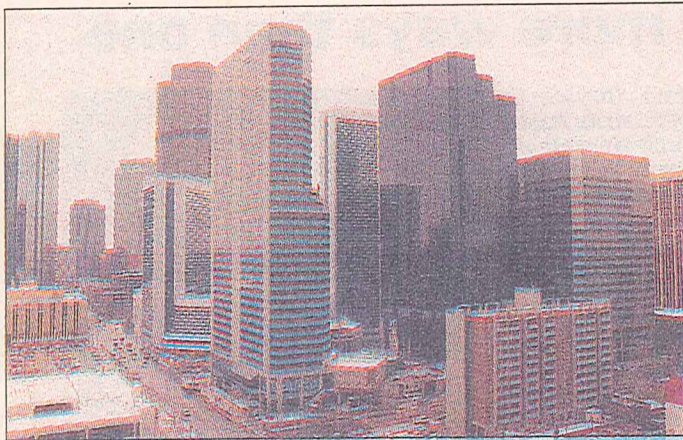
*Larry King Live* is seen nightly on CNN and simulcast on the Westwood One radio network.



Castle Rock Entertainment  
**NICOLAS CAGE:** On screen now in 'Kiss of Death'

## New life in Denver

An urban renaissance is under way in LoDo, Denver's lower downtown. The Mile High City's trendiest area to see and be seen in. Tomorrow.



By Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY

A good thing gets better.

Introducing softer chewing, longer lasting Freedent.

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AP

**MAILER:** He writes at length about JFK's alleged assassin.

# Mailer's tedious 'Oswald's Tale'

USA TODAY 4/27/95

## Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery

By Norman Mailer  
Random House, \$30, 791 pp.

Norman Mailer reigns as one of the great writers of our time, but, boy, he chose the wrong subject for this 791-page non-fiction tome. Readers not obsessed with Lee Harvey Oswald will require toothpicks to keep their eyelids from droop-

ing into a coma-like slumber while attempting to get through the first part of this book.

And worse news for those fascinated by the question: Was JFK killed as part of a larger conspiracy? Mailer offers little but conjecture. Instead, he presents passage after passage from other sources, such as the 1977 book *Marina and Lee* and testimony from the Warren Commission Hearings.

Try as he might, Mailer fails

## BOOK REVIEW

DEIRDRE DONAHUE

to convince the reader that Oswald was a tragic figure rather than a delusional loser hungry for fame at any cost.

*Oswald's Tale* opens not with the assassin's youth but rather with the 2½ years he spent in the U.S.S.R. Beginning in 1959, Oswald lived and worked there, eventually marrying a Russian girl named Marina.

Mailer makes great display of his six months' research in Minsk, the former Soviet city. Working with Lawrence Schiller, Mailer interviewed former

KGB operatives as well as Oswald's friends and co-workers. He also drew on KGB reports.

While they glean original information, it is interesting mostly because it gives a sense of life under communism. In this section, Mailer also glosses his prose with a *faux* Russian tone that induces narcolepsy.

The second part of the book examines Oswald's life in the U.S.: his miserable childhood, his narcissistic mother, his unhappy stint in the Marines, his dyslexia, his sexuality, his politics and his thirst for grandeur.

And at the end of this very long, tedious book, Mailer concludes — no surprise — Oswald probably acted alone.

# Oswald, We Hardly Knew Ye

New Russian details inform Mailer's huge bio of a miserable little failure

## OSWALD'S TALE:

### An American Mystery

By Norman Mailer

(Random House, \$30)

#### By DAVID HINCKLEY

Daily News Staff Writer

**I**F NORMAN MAILER HAD to condense his 800-page biography of Lee Harvey Oswald into one sentence, here's a suggestion: "It was a terrible life."

Where Jimmy Stewart ascended to grace through a series of small successes, the antihero of "Oswald's Tale" stumbles through failures so abject, no one notices or cares.

He fails as a defector to the Soviet Union. He fails as a repatriated American. He wants to go to Cuba but can't get there. He can't hold a job. His apartments are as miserable as the life he lives in them.

Even his efforts to fight back are ordinary and small: He curses the government, slaps his wife around.

True, he did kill President John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, thus fulfilling his vow to alter history. But if this was victory, he paid a loser's price. Two days later, he was dead.

Mailer enters the Oswald story knowing the suspicions that have always swirled around the assassination — the mob, Cubans, the CIA? — and emerges admitting he has no clear answers. If the fall of certain shadows suggests conspiratorial interplays, he admits, they remain hidden.



**A NOBODY WHO MADE HISTORY:** Lee Harvey Oswald being led through the Dallas police station one day after the assassination.

So he takes the reader as far as defensible speculation allows, and in the end this responsible strategy works: Free from the pressure of having to win the game, he can concentrate on playing it.

Which he does very nicely.

What's new mostly comes from six months Mailer spent in Russia, talking with folks who knew Oswald and reading transcripts from KGB wiretaps of Oswald's apartment.

The KGB found little of interest in Oswald or his young bride, Marina, whose stunning blue eyes were matched by the

sharpness of her tongue. If someone was pulling Oswald's strings, Mailer suggests, it was more likely anti-Commies than the Commies themselves.

And yet Mailer also notes a strong strain of the Lone Nut in Oswald — like the time he wrote out his own world order, à la Hitler.

In the end, Mailer's Oswald comes across as a basic cipher who did something bad enough to be noticed before he passed away unlamented.

More sympathy accrues to Marina, who in late November 1963 found herself thousands

of miles from home with two small children, the mother-in-law from hell and a husband both reviled and dead.

The ending to "Oswald," in fact, comes less with his quick, cheap death than with Marina — eyes still blue, cigaret habit steady at four packs a day — dutifully performing one more autopsy 30 years later.

Mailer suggests she simply doesn't know what happened, which is also true for the rest of us, which is why we, too, keep poking, pinching and probing. The difference is, Marina wants to stop.

# Oswald and Mailer: The

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

Even though more than 2,000 books have already been written about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the prospect of reading a new one about Lee Harvey Oswald seems intriguing — if the author is Norman Mailer. The topic, after all, looks like the perfect magnet for all the author's talents and preoccupations. What Mr. Mailer calls "the greatest mountain of mystery in the 20th century" not only offers him another opportunity to fulfill what he once called his need "to speak to one's time," but also serves as a dark mirror of the themes he has addressed throughout his 47-year-long career: the confluence of psychic and social disorder, the anarchic consequences of violence, and the relationship between a self-declared outlaw and the status quo.

In the course of "Oswald's Tale," Mr. Mailer explains to the reader exactly what he hopes to do. By probing the life and character of Lee Harvey Oswald, he says, he hopes to understand him, and in doing so, "come to the end of an ongoing question: Did Oswald kill President Kennedy? And, if so, did he do it on his own or as part of a conspiracy?"

Oddly enough, there is both too little and too much of Mr. Mailer in "Oswald's Tale." Much of this cumbersome volume consists of little but excerpts from earlier books and studies, cut and pasted together into an awkward collage. At the same time, Mr. Mailer declines to use his enormous gifts as a reporter and novelist to create an unvarnished portrait of his subject (the way he did with Gary Gilmore in his 1979 masterpiece, "The Executioner's Song"), but instead clumsily tries to force his material into an unyielding cookie-cutter shape. The result is a book that succeeds simultaneously in being boring and presumptuous, derivative and solipsistic.

It takes Mr. Mailer nearly 800 pages to complete his examination of Oswald's character, and by the end of the book, he has turned — or tried to turn — his subject into a typically Maileresque hero: a visionary (if highly deluded) malcontent whose only fealty is "to himself and to his own ideas," a man obsessed with proving his own manhood and convinced "that he has the makings

Speculation under  
the protection of  
'he had to feel' or  
'it is possible.'

of a great leader." In short, Mr. Mailer has created a close relative of Stephen Rojack in "An American Dream" and of the hipster in "The White Negro" who knows that "if the fate of 20th-century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey with the rebellious imperatives of the self."

Mr. Mailer also concludes "that Lee had the character to kill Kennedy and that he probably did it alone," that "it is too difficult, no matter how one searches for a viable scenario, to believe that others could have chosen him to be the rifleman in a conspiracy."

Despite the proliferation of conspiracy theories over the years (the C.I.A. did it, the Mafia did it, etc.), this observation is hardly new. The much-debunked Warren Commission came to more or less the same conclusion over three decades ago, and Gerald Posner's 1993 book "Case Closed," which similarly zeroed in on Oswald's character, made a powerful case for the same.

Indeed, much of "Oswald's Tale" amounts to a tiresome rehashing of familiar details and arguments. The first half of the book, which is devoted to the two and a half years Oswald lived in the Soviet Union (from 1959 to 1962), sprang, Mr. Mailer says, from "an offer from the Belarus K.G.B. to allow a look into their files on Oswald," and from a desire to take advantage of the loosening of cold war tensions, which might incline former friends and colleagues in the Soviet Union to talk freely.

This section of "Oswald's Tale" is told in eccentric, pared-down English that is supposed to provide a kind of stylistic equivalent to Rus-

Harold -  
br: 11/11/11  
SA 4  
WRONG!

## Eternal Basic Questions

sian (much the way the flat, uninflected prose of "The Executioner's Song" evoked the idiom of the Western United States), and it provides a finely nuanced portrait of daily life in the Soviet Union during the Khrushchev era. But it does little to add to our understanding of Oswald, who remains something of a black hole in his one-time associates' recollections. The major revelations about his years in the Soviet Union (that the K.G.B. monitored his daily activities, that K.G.B. officials say they never regarded him as a potential operative and in fact initially suspected him of spying for the United States) were laid out as long ago as November 1991, when ABC's "Nightline" broadcast a special report on Oswald's K.G.B. files, and they were amplified further by Mr. Posner's book, which drew on interviews with the famous K.G.B. defector Yuri Nosenko.

In the second half of "Oswald's Tale," the material Mr. Mailer presents grows even more familiar. Indeed, whole sections here are quotations from earlier books. There are long sections from the Warren Commission's 26-volume report, long citations from Priscilla Johnson McMillan's 1977 biography of the Oswalds, "Marina and Lee," and even a couple of quotes from Mr. Mailer's own novel, "Harlot's Ghost." In several chapters, Mr. Mailer observes, "there will be no more demand on the author than to serve as a literary usher who is there to guide each transcript to its proper placement on the page." This scissors-and-glue job, however, has also been heavily embroidered with Mr. Mailer's own speculation about

Oswald and his drives, ambitions and motives — speculation that grows increasingly elaborate as the book plods wearily toward its end.

Some of this speculation is harmlessly looney, such as Mr. Mailer's contention that high K.G.B. officers tend to look like American intellectuals. Other passages, however, ominously recall the irresponsible techniques pioneered by Joe McGinniss in "The Last Brother," relying heavily on phrases like "there is a real chance," "he had to feel," "we have to entertain the possibility." "it is possible" and "it is far from wholly improbable."

Mr. Mailer writes that "a physical resemblance" between Oswald and Hitler "had to be, consciously or unconsciously, in Oswald's mind," that "one need only pencil in a mustache on any photograph of Oswald in profile to feel the force of the resemblance."

In another chapter that recounts the mysterious death of a fellow marine during Oswald's time in the service, Mr. Mailer notes that Martin Schrand "could have been killed by a Filipino," but portentously adds, "If it was Oswald, however — and let us assume that the probability of that has to be small but not inconceivable — then what a sense he would have had thereafter of being forever an outlaw, an undiscovered and as yet unprosecuted criminal."

There is little effort in such passages to find and evaluate discernible facts; rather, Mr. Mailer willfully veers even further into the realm of imaginative fancy than Don DeLillo did in his powerful 1988 Oswald novel "Libra." Playing his time-hon-



Associated Press

Lee Harvey Oswald

### OSWALD'S TALE An American Mystery

By Norman Mailer

328 pages. Random House. \$30.

ored games with labeling, Mr. Mailer still coyly insists that "Oswald's Tale" is "most certainly not fiction." The book, he argues, can be seen "as a special species of nonfiction that can be put under the rubric of *mystery*."

"That," he goes on, "is because all means of inquiry have to be available when one is steering one's way through a cloud — especially if there are arguments about the accuracy of the navigating instruments, which in this case are the facts."

By the end of the narrative, as Mr. Mailer sums up the fateful events of Nov. 22, 1963, he tries to enter Oswald's mind. "Oswald may never have read Emerson," he writes, "but the following passage from

'Heroism' gives us luminous insight into what had to be Oswald's opinion of himself as he sat on the sixth floor waiting for the Kennedy motorcade — he was committing himself to the most heroic deed of which he was capable." Mr. Mailer then proceeds to quote a long passage from Emerson that begins: "Self-trust is the essence of heroism. It is the state of the soul at war, and its ultimate objects are the last defiance of falsehood and wrong, and the power to bear all that can be inflicted by evil agents."

Elsewhere in this volume, Mr. Mailer refers to the "tragedy" of Lee Harvey Oswald and his "long and determined dream of political triumph, wifely approbation and high destiny." In the end, such efforts to dress a man — who by most other accounts was a small-time, troubled loser — in the garments of heroism not only seem like a perverse misreading of a historical personage but also reflect an unwillingness (not unlike that displayed by conspiracy theorists) to acknowledge the possibility of historical absurdity and random disorder.

As Mr. Mailer himself writes in this long-winded and ultimately superfluous book: "If a figure as large as Kennedy is cheated abruptly of his life, we feel better, inexplicably better, if his killer is also not without size. Then, to some degree, we can also mourn the loss of possibility in the man who did the deed. Tragedy is vastly preferable to absurdity. Such is the vested interest that adheres to perceiving Oswald as a tragic and infuriating hero (or, if you will, anti-hero) rather than as a snarling little wife abuser or a pat-sy."



# Book

# World

## Portrait Of a Lone Gunman

### OSWALD'S TALE An American Mystery

By Norman Mailer  
Random House. 791 pp. \$30

By Joseph FINDER

**I**N *OSWALD'S TALE: An American Mystery*, his finest achievement since *The Executioner's Song* (1979), Norman Mailer writes eloquently about our need to plumb the depths of the Kennedy assassination for a conspiracy. "It is virtually not assimilable to our reason," he contends, "that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a nonentity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd."

Indeed, Mailer admits that he set out to create this portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald with "a prejudice in favor of the conspiracy theorists."

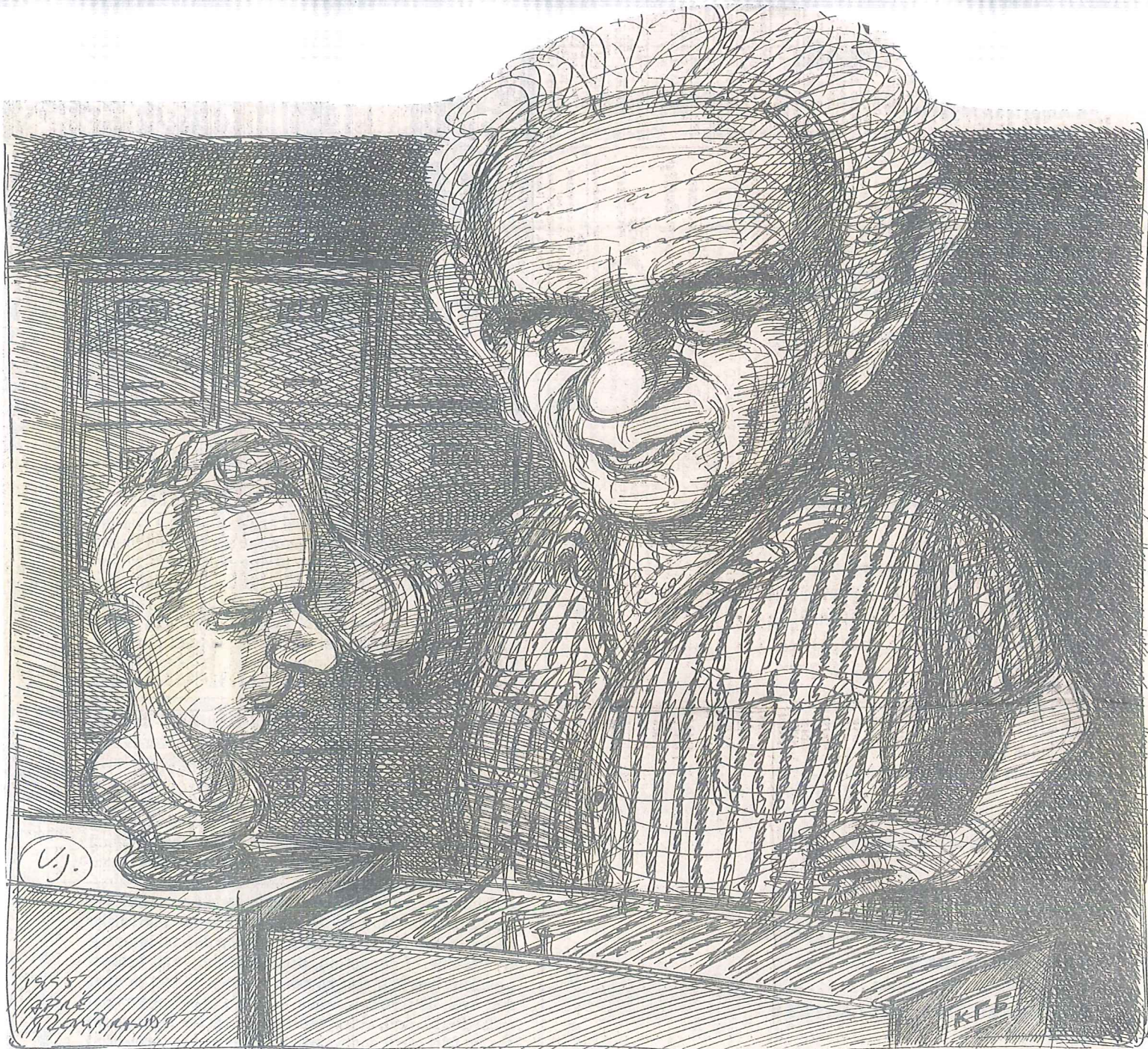
But although he became convinced that Oswald acted alone, he also quickly realized that "the difficulty with closing the case on Oswald is that every time one shuts the door, a crack opens in the wall." He had to settle for a more modest aim—to "set up a base camp on the slopes of such a mystery"—though, as he admits, "few who build a base camp have no ambitions to reach the summit."

The result is something only Mailer could have pulled off, a brilliant blend of scholarly obsession, journalistic shoe leather and grand intellection. *Oswald's Tale* is surprising, at times deliberately oblique and often spellbinding.

The first of the book's two "volumes" is a section of some 300 pages that describes the two and a half years that Oswald spent in Minsk after his 1959 defection to the Soviet Union. It is told almost entirely in the words of friends and acquaintances of Oswald and his Russian wife, Marina Prusakova, and rendered in indirect discourse, employing a comic, pidgin, Russian-accented English. Interleaved are extracts from KGB surveillance reports—highly suspicious of the young ex-Marine who came to stay, Russian intelligence kept Oswald under close scrutiny—and transcripts of the frequent marital spats between Lee and Marina.

These long-sealed transcripts, to which Mailer was granted exclusive access, allow him to give us an exhaustive depiction of the early days of the marriage between Lee and Marina. Their marriage was even worse than we sus-

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"NORMAN MAILER CONTEMPLATING THE BUST OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD," AN ILLUSTRATION BY VICTOR JUHASZ FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

pected; Marina seems harsher and more goading, and Lee, whose low self-esteem alternated with towering megalomania, comes across as both more affecting and more put-upon.

Mailer and his associate, Lawrence Schiller, were also given the opportunity to interview 17 KGB officers, five of them in depth, and were able to confirm in illuminating detail what the KGB defector Yuri Nosenko told the CIA in 1964: that far from attempting to suborn Oswald, the Russian intelligence establishment was convinced he had been dispatched to penetrate them. Repeatedly they attempted to provoke him into revealing his true mission. They set out morsels—they had a friend and co-worker of Oswald's approach him and boast that his father was an important Soviet Air

Force general (and thus a perfect espionage target)—but Oswald didn't take the bait.

**V**OLUME TWO, "Oswald in America," covers Oswald's childhood and Marine career, touching on the question of whether, while stationed in Tokyo, Oswald sold information to the Soviets (he may have, Mailer concludes), and then moving on to Marina and Lee in Dallas and New Orleans, their contacts among the Russian émigré community and the days leading to the assassination.

Here Mailer relies far more on the work of others, most extensively Priscilla Johnson McMillan's masterly (and still unsurpassed) *Marina and Lee*, to which he acknowledges a major

debt. One of his major sources is even the Warren Commission's investigation, which—though he compares it to "a dead whale decomposing on a beach," so devoid is it of "the inquiring spark"—he considers a Comstock Lode of raw biographical material that helps limn Oswald's character. From such sources he assembles countless fragments into a narrative mosaic. This technique, which represents Mailer's attempt to make sense of Oswald's life, could have turned into a vast cut-and-paste job in the hands of a lesser writer.

If the Kennedy assassination is "our own largest American mystery," as Mailer insists, there is no field more trod upon. Yet Mailer manages to make his undertaking new by taking novelistic liberties that a traditional historian never would. One of the KGB officers who makes an appearance in the book—a character Mailer imagines as resembling the late William Paley, chairman of CBS—is actually an amalgam of several. Still, Mailer does not permit this license to detract from the fundamental gravitas of the historical enterprise. There is, he says, no made-up dialogue; all speculation is so labeled.

*Continued on page 6*

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# Oswald's Tale

*Continued from page 1*

And he puts his formidable novelistic talents to good use in bringing to life a colorful cast of characters, most centrally Oswald's mother, the dread Marguerite, whose "yoke of oppression" Lee was always struggling to escape. "The internal workings of her psyche," Mailer writes, "were always condemned to hard labor." Appropriately, *Oswald's Tale* begins and ends with Marguerite, "with her outrageous ego and her self-deceit, her bold loneliness and cold bones, those endless humiliations that burn like sores."

Mailer advances a number of theories about Oswald's role in the assassination, and if they are not new (what rumination on this subject is?) they are made with such tight, sinuous logic and supple prose that they cannot but persuade. On the nagging question of Jack Ruby—why, if it wasn't a conspiracy, did this small-time, Mafia-linked hood kill Oswald?—Mailer dazzles. He takes us on a speculative tour of Ruby's tortured psyche, through its twists and turns, and then presents us with several entirely plausible hypotheses that might explain a Mafia attempt to cover up a deed carried out by Oswald alone. For instance: What if either Carlos Marcello or Santo Trafficante, the mobsters who wanted Kennedy dead, had actually given the order—through a long series of cut-outs, as they'd have to—only to see the President actually gunned down, the assassin calling himself a patsy? Would not Oswald have to be eliminated?

Mailer Delights in the counterintuitive, in the sharp and sudden left turn, but at times his contentions seem less than



Lee Harvey Oswald with Marina Prusakova

warranted by the evidence. He maintains that Oswald's personal attitude toward Kennedy had little to do with his act, a position that ignores Marina's obsession with Kennedy (documented in McMillan's *Marina and Lee*), the photographs of him she kept around, and how often and longingly she spoke of him to Lee. It seems peculiar that the author of the 1960 essay "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," which so captured Kennedy's sexual electricity, denies the emotional centrality of the glamorous young president as a presence in Marina and Lee's lives—perhaps a contributing factor, impossible though it may be to weigh.

Oswald killed Kennedy, Mailer argues, in order to be taken seriously as a political actor. The assassination of the American president—"the largest opportunity he had ever been offered"—would vault him out of obscurity and mediocrity into greatness and immortality. *Oswald's Tale*, finally, is a long

meditation on identity (Mailer's great *idée fixe*) and on Oswald's need to achieve fame. It is here that Mailer is at his finest—imagining Oswald immediately following the assassination: "At rest in the vibrationless center of a dream," for "he had passed through the mightiest of the psychic barriers—he had killed the king." To Mailer, preoccupied so long with his own literary immortality and the dealings of literary regicide, Oswald's craving to secure a place in history must resonate deeply.

Oswald's life is a maddening warren of false leads, blind alleys, counterfeit identities. Everywhere he went he covered his tracks, confounded imagined enemies. "The lie," Mailer says, "has been Oswald's tool all his life." Here, then is the great irony of Lee Harvey Oswald: Like a squid leaving a cloud of ink in the water, Oswald created about himself a miasma of doubt and uncertainty, thereby feeding the conspiracy theories that even now would deny him credit for his great claim to celebrity.

If Norman Mailer has mellowed in recent years, as is so often observed, it has not meant a slackening in his vaunted powers of observation. The Mailer who in 1973, embarrassing to recall, proposed establishing a "People's CIA" and who in his famous 1976 essay on Watergate and the CIA, "A Harlot High and Low," gravely staked a claim as a Conspiracy Theorist, has of late begun to veer away from a fixation on conspiracy and paranoia, though without becoming less interesting. Calculated outrageousness has given way to cunning reason and subtlety of intellect. In *Oswald's Tale*, he may have failed to achieve the peak he set out to scale, but he has nevertheless achieved something still more ambitious and magnificent. America's largest mystery has found its greatest interpreter. ■

# Book-of-the-Month Club

SELECTIONS • MAY 1995



# Norman M Oswald's

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# Tale

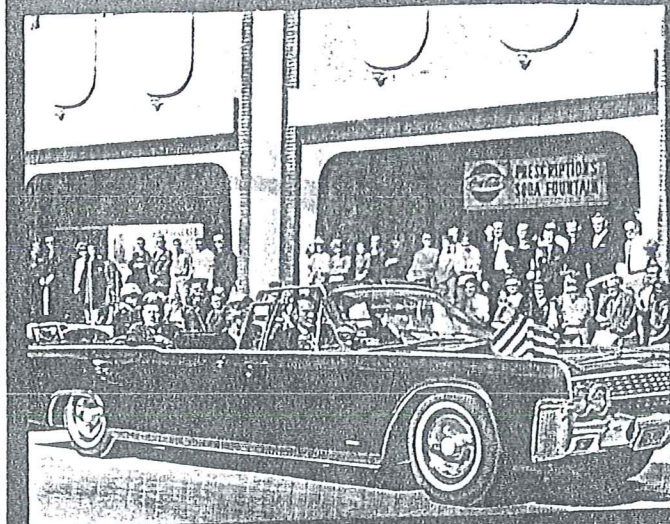


## The May Main Selection

Drawing on previously unpublished KGB files, Norman Mailer brings

# Norman Oswald

Report by Book-of-the-Month Club  
Creative Director Joseph Cummins



**I**N HIS RIVETING NEW BOOK *OSWALD'S TALE*, NORMAN MAILER is doing something no one else has really dared to do before: he is attempting to discover Lee Harvey Oswald's humanity.

"What kind of man was he? What was his inner reality? Would we have liked him in any fashion, and felt compassion for his troubles, or would we end by seeing him as a disgorgement from the errors of the cosmos, a monster?"

Was Lee Harvey Oswald an assassin with a vision? Or merely a killer without one? "For the sudden death of a man as large in his possibilities as John Fitzgerald Kennedy is more tolerable if we can perceive his killer as tragic rather than absurd," writes

Mailer in this meticulously researched and vibrant true story of the life and death of Lee Harvey Oswald. *Oswald's Tale* reveals not conspiracy, but character. We have come, says Mailer, to "search for the nature of the man before we seek out the plot."

In 1959, the troubled 20-year-old Lee Harvey Oswald—an ex-Marine and budding Marxist ideologue—defected to

the Soviet Union and was sent by the somewhat puzzled authorities to the provincial city of Minsk, where the KGB could more easily keep an eye on him. In 1993, Norman Mailer spent six months in Minsk carefully interviewing Oswald's former friends and sweethearts and obtaining exclusive access to KGB surveillance reports more than 30 years old. They include transcripts of the bugging of Lee and his new wife Marina's apartment. After Russia, Mailer brings us with Oswald and his new family—Marina and an infant daughter—back to the United States, where he reconstructs Oswald's life, beginning with his birth in New Orleans in 1939, and subsequent wanderings with his over-

“Oswald owned all the elements that cohere in a ghost—ambition, deceit, a sense of mission, and the untold frustration of an abrupt death just as a long-held dream of personal prominence was about to unfold. Can there be any American of our century who, having failed to gain stature while he was alive, now haunts us more?”

4/26/95

files,  
Lee Harvey Oswald to stunning life

# Mailer Oswald's Tale

weening mother, Marguerite. From there, searching for clues to Oswald's motive and character, Mailer resumes Oswald's adult life and takes us step-by-step through the assassination and its aftermath.

What do we learn? That Lee Harvey Oswald was a loner ("a cat who walked by himself," according to one Russian who knew him); that he possessed a monumental ego (Oswald considered himself "one of the principalities of the universe"); that a New York social worker met the 13-year-old Oswald—a 1950s version of a latchkey kid—and described him thusly: "There is a rather pleasant, appealing quality about this emotionally starved, affectionless youngster which grows as one speaks to him...." The KGB tapes make clear that Oswald and Marina fought like typical newlyweds (Oswald: "You weren't this way before." Marina: "Neither were you."), but later, in America, he beat her.

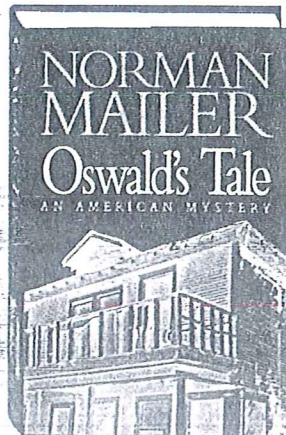
Here was a man for whom "no pit was so deep...as the abyss of unrequited love," killing the king of male sexual icons, JFK. Here was a man, harassed for his views by the intelligence services of two countries, who simply walked by everyone and fired the shot that would change things forever—but not before leaving his wedding ring in a cup for his sleeping wife.

Conspiracy theories will still abound, but in this, his best book since *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer has located and achingly opened up for us the solitary and heretofore elusive heart of a man who almost certainly operated by himself on that fateful day. *Oswald's Tale* opens fresh vistas on the familiar, reads like the wind and lingers a long, long time in our minds.

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## An exclusive

### talk with Norman Mailer

In Norman Mailer's Brooklyn Heights living room two walls are lined entirely with books, while another provides a spectacular floor-to-ceiling prospect of the office towers of lower Manhattan, the Brooklyn Bridge and the East River. The place has the warm, sheltering feel of a cozy room that is also an aerie.



We visited Mailer to talk about *Oswald's Tale* one day last January, a week or so before his 73rd birthday. Mailer was welcoming and friendly, with his famous halo of white hair undiminished. He told us that *Oswald's Tale* really began when he was invited to Russia to study the secret KGB files on Lee Harvey Oswald. He jumped at the opportunity ("the equivalent to an Oklahoma Land Grab") and after six months living in Minsk found "there was much more to Oswald than I expected.... He had a unique balance and imbalance. It's almost his signature: his balance and imbalance. [He] believed in himself the way people like Lenin, Hitler and Marx believed in themselves." Mailer's goal became to "make Oswald come alive like a major character in a novel.... He was always a cipher." To further this, he extended his book to include Oswald in America, studied the Warren Commission books and the House Special Committee on Assassinations findings and even spent five days in Texas with Marina, Oswald's widow, who, Mailer says, "has this obsessive question: 'How much of this is my fault—should I blame myself or not?' [She has] a terrible obsession."

In fact, much of *Oswald's Tale* is about obsession: Oswald's obsession with leaving his mark on the world and America's obsession with the assassination. "I'll never forgive [Oswald]," Mailer says, "because we'll never get over the tragedy that a man who could have been a great president, or could not have been, didn't live long enough to fulfill our notion of history. That leaves a gap in a nation's collective psyche just like a marriage that ends too soon. People are obsessed...for the rest of their lives." Mailer himself admits to having a fascination with violent loners such as Oswald and the executed convict Gary Gilmore, about whom he wrote his 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Executioner's Song*. In fact, Oswald and Gilmore reminded him of each other: "Every time you're about to like Oswald he does something that takes away the beginnings of a small affection for him. Gilmore was the same way."

At the end of our interview, Norman Mailer returned to the meaning *Oswald's Tale* has for him:

"I think finally what we're dealing with here is a double tragedy," he says. "The immense major tragedy of Kennedy's assassination and the minor but nonetheless intense tragedy of Oswald's end."

Interview by BOMC Executive Editor Andre Bernard  
and Creative Director Joseph Cummins

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS COVER & INSIDE FOR BOMC BY STEVEN DANA; PHOTOS COURTESY OF (TOP LEFT) THE TIME INC. PICTURE COLLECTION; (CENTER AND BOTTOM) LIP/NETMANN/AUTHOR PHOTO; (RIGHT) BY JONATHAN

# Lee Harvey Oswald, by Mailer



Lee Harvey Oswald in handcuffs shortly after his arrest.

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## OSWALD'S TALE

### An American Mystery

By Norman Mailer

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### Reviewed by Barbie Zelizer

**T**he distinction among fact, fiction and the world in between lies not only in which literary devices an author chooses to use, but in the expectations we, as readers, invoke in appropriating the author's work. The labels of one kind or another that we assign a book help shape its ultimate cultural force.

So when Norman Mailer writes *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* — a book on the Kennedy assassination with nearly 800

pages of text and the authority of a six-month search of KGB files in the Russian city of Minsk and interviews with everyone remotely connected to Lee Harvey Oswald during his 2½-year stay there (1959-1962) — we take note. And we begin a conversation with our own unconscious expectations concerning what the book will and will not do — as fact, as fiction,

See **LEE HARVEY OSWALD** on M4

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Barbie Zelizer, an assistant professor of rhetoric and communication at Temple, is working on a book titled "Snapshots of Memory: The Image, the Word and the Holocaust," to be published by the University of Chicago Press next year. She is the author of "Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media and the Shaping of Collective Memory."

PHILA INQUIRER

SUNDAY MAY 7, 1995

M1

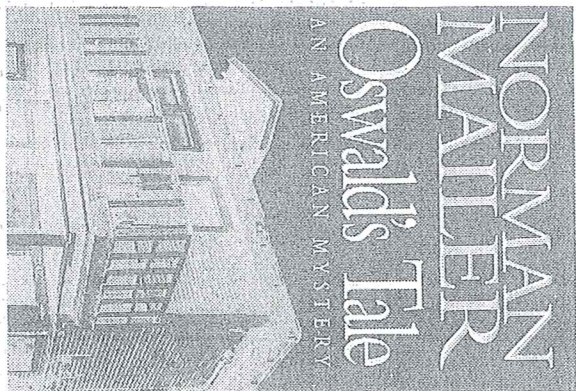


LEE HARVEY OSWALD from M1 and as an example of the untoward ways in which they blend.

If we choose to see the book solely as fact, then we expect to know more about the Kennedy assassination from reading it than we already know from the more than 2,000 titles on the market. We hope to find additional nuances to push our understanding of the 1963 murder of President John F. Kennedy in new directions. We want to hear about the untold side of links to the CIA, FBI, KGB, pro- and anti-Castro forces, or organized crime, giving us a novel slant on the familiar "whodunit" tale. All so that the decades-old question of "who killed Kennedy" will finally bear a more satisfying resolution.

As fact, however, Mailer's book offers little new. His fundamental thesis — the tried and somewhat tiresome notion that Lee Harvey Oswald did it alone — is as old as the Warren Commission Report, even if it is surprising to hear Mailer espouse any version of the lone-gunner theory. His relentless interviews with KGB functionaries and Oswald's former friends in Minsk, conducted with the aid of Larry Schiller (who helped Mailer with his book on Gary Gilmore, *The Executioner's Song*), do not provide a new informative gloss. Even his examination of KGB surveillance reports and files — which discuss both the KGB's extensive monitoring of Lee and his Russian wife, Marina, in the Soviet Union and his dismissal of Oswald as any kind of KGB or American intelligence operative — supports media reports published years ago.

But if we choose to see the book as a hybrid of fact and fiction, then we expect good storytelling as much as cold, hard facts. We want a tale so replete with stylistic imagination that it coaxes us into the story's complexities without any hope of resolving them all. Our reading, we hope, will enrich and deepen our



Norman Mailer conducted a six-month search of KGB files in Minsk and interviewed many people connected to Lee Harvey Oswald during Oswald's 2½-year stay in the Soviet Union.

appreciation of the culture derived from the matrix of facts as much as a systematic understanding of the facts themselves. Facts, in this scenario, are used to service the telling of the story rather than the other way around. So if they don't match, don't fit, don't even make sense, it matters less than the ability to tell the story well.

Within this alternative scenario, Mailer shines. Using facts as "navigating instruments" in a way that he perfected in *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer re-creates the mundane reality of Lee Harvey Oswald with such plodding detail that by book's end we are left with flattened expectations about how this person could have possibly shaped history. In Mailer's eyes, Oswald is a lonely malcontent with Marxist persuasions and delusions of grandeur. From the book's first part, set in Minsk, to the second,

set in America, Mailer gives us an Oswald "without size," a person who lives always in excess of his capabilities and circumstances — beating his wife, loving his mother, and espousing ideology to such extreme degrees that it all finally does him in.

Explaining Kennedy's assassination through the flaws in Oswald's character has been attempted before, notably by Gerald Posner in *Case Closed* and Don DeLillo in *Libra*. But neither handled Oswald with the kind of dexterity and literary imagination that Mailer here supplies in great force. He treats each document on his way to telling the story as a kernel to be read anew, carefully weaving personal interviews, passages from published books and television retrospectives, excerpts from Warren Commission hearings, and Mailer-esque speculation into a patchwork of multi-layered detail that

guides the reader toward a recognition of Oswald's ultimate mediocrity. In taking us not only through documents about which we know little but through documents that are cloyingly familiar, this imaginative tour back in time both tells us about Oswald and about the broader assassination culture. Mining the terrain of existing literature on Kennedy's death, the book reminds us of how we came to know what we know about the assassination. In so doing, it adds rich texture to a story that typically becomes flatter and less interesting each time it has been tackled by the predictable voices surrounding it since Kennedy died.

At times, Mailer the author chips away at the autonomy of Oswald's own character. Passages detailing the shape of Mailer's own absorption with the material, pretentious addresses to the reader, and lengthy quotes from Mailer's earlier novel, *Hart's Ghost*, seem out of place in a tale that easily stands on its own.

Similarly bothersome references to Hitler (both extensive quoting from *Mein Kampf*, which Oswald had borrowed from the library in the days preceding Kennedy's death, and a ridiculous discussion of the physical resemblance of Oswald and Hitler) unnecessarily deflate Oswald's tale.

But these are minor points in a tale that is vintage Mailer. The book, Mailer hopes, will "create a form of its own somewhere between fiction and non-fiction." On this, he has succeeded. For in the space between fact and fiction, *Oswald's Tale* weaves a story not only about Oswald or Kennedy's death but about the culture surrounding the assassination, one that remains replete with misconceptions, unraveled threads and a lack of resolution. All of which makes *Oswald's Tale* more true-to-life than any fact-driven treatise could hope to be.

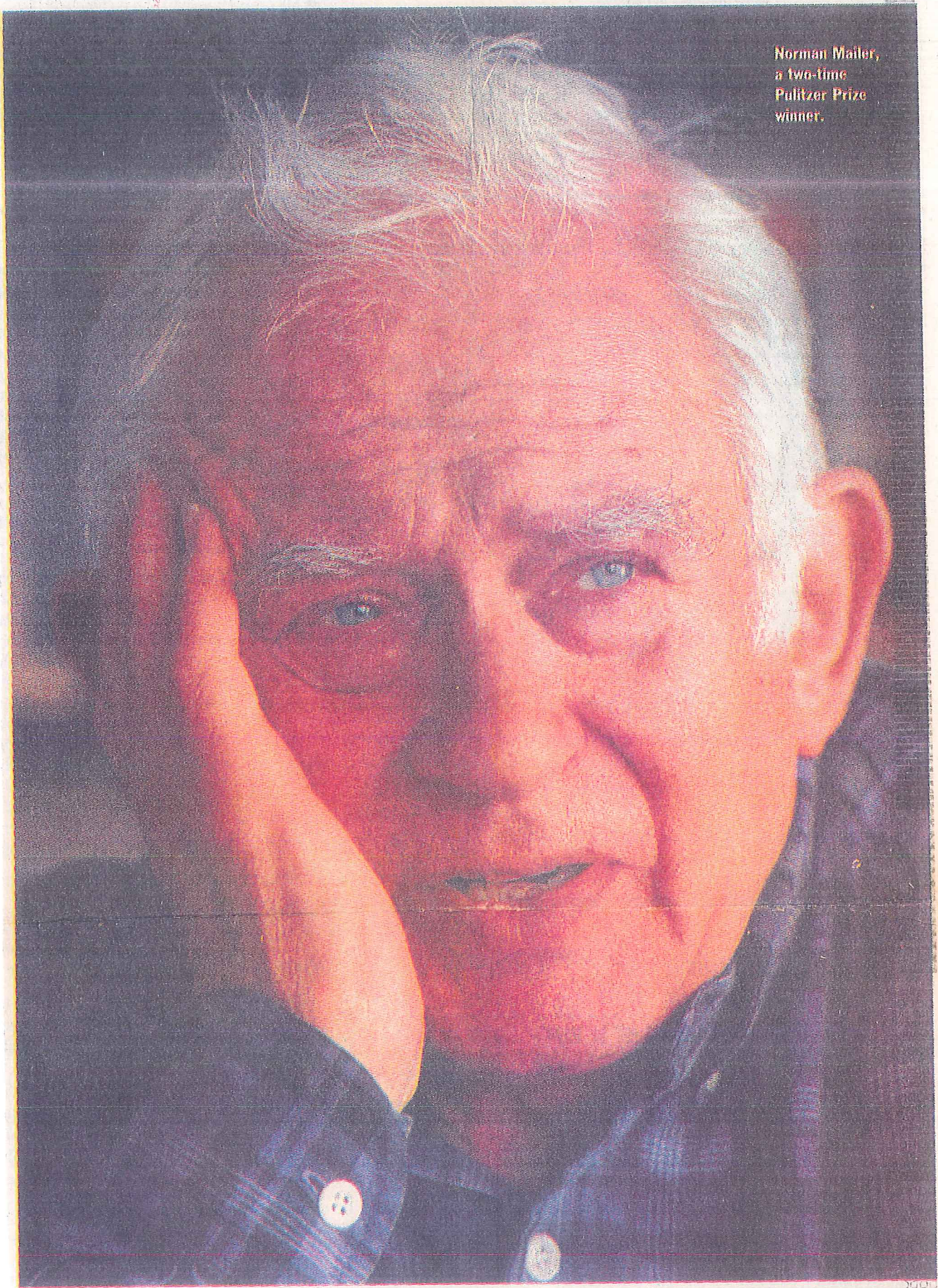
# Living Arts

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THE BOSTON GLOBE • TUESDAY, MAY 2, 1995

# MAILER OBSESSED

Norman Mailer,  
a two-time  
Pulitzer Prize  
winner.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MARK WILSON

## MAILER

Continued from Page 59

"It's grim," Mailer says of Minsk. "In a way it was one of the coldest places I ever lived. I was there 5½ months. I doubt there were 10 sunny days. There was a kind of bleakness. There's no such thing as a good meal that you can find in Minsk. Nothing to do but work. No night life."

Mailer lived on sweet bread and cabbage and other Russian dishes. Old KGB agents who had spied on Oswald met with Mailer. They'd offer a little information. And they'd clam up too: the KGB line. Russia was hard, but it was invigorating being in the land of very big shadows, enormous secrets.

...

## A worker in two countries

Mailer feels Lee Harvey Oswald has slipped through the cracks of literary understanding.

Much is known about Oswald. He was a puny man who had high opinions of himself. He liked books and good writing. His eyes were dark as olives. He was a rootless man. In Texas he may have been unkindly referred to as "poor white trash."

If America wouldn't give him respect, he thought he'd find it in Russia.

"Oswald is the only individual I know who, in the 20th century, lived in both countries below the level of politics, even though he was obsessed with politics," allows Mailer. "He lived as a worker in both countries. He knew both countries at ground level. The comedy of the Cold War comes through in his life."

While he was breathing, Lee Harvey Oswald fascinated few people in his short life. Mailer eyes him through his own lens.

"What fascinated me was his boldness," says Mailer. "People think of Oswald as a little nerd. Here you have a guy who, before he's 20, goes to Russia with this huge innocence and figures they'll make him a hero overnight."

Oswald learned Russian. Learning Russian is no month in the country either.

Mailer doesn't come out and say it, but you can feel it, the way you can sometimes feel snow coming behind chill and grayness. There were connections in the lives of Mailer and Oswald:

Both were dreamers. Both were US Marines who felt unappreciated in the Marines. "I was an-

gry at the military. They didn't recognize me sufficiently," says Mailer. "I understand how he felt."

Both men were suspicious of bureaucracies. Oswald marched on Red Square. Mailer, protesting the Vietnam War, marched on the Pentagon.

Both men wanted to write.

Lee Harvey Oswald knelt his bony legs on the floor of a Texas book depository and fired away. He couldn't write.

Mailer wrote.

Fame found both in the end. A different kind of fame for each, of course.

"He's not a likable fellow," Mailer concludes about Oswald. "He was a psychopathic liar. Liars are very bad for one's own spiritual footing. Liars make you feel you are walking in a field of snakes. But, considering he had nothing, the guy had moxie. He goes to the Soviet Union."

...

## Lee and Marina

In Russia Oswald meets Marina Prusakova. She's cute, maybe downright lovely to an expatriate American a long way from home and living in a shoebox.

Marina Prusakova had been born out of wedlock. She was a reader - Pushkin, Chekhov, Turgenyev, of course Dostoevski. And she had some style, wearing her hair, as she put it, "a la Brigitte Bardot."

Oswald thought he could take on the Russians with his youth and energy. The Russians thought otherwise. "They send him to Minsk, give him a job in a factory," says Mailer.

The days and nights are long for Oswald in Russia. He won't allow faith - in himself - to rot. "Slowly," adds Mailer, "it comes over him, he's going nowhere."

In love, Oswald wants to return to America. He fusses with the KGB. He demands to go home. He argues with the US State Department. Lee Harvey Oswald does not lack nerve.

"Here you have this kid, he takes on both departments - the State Department and the entire apparatus of the Soviet Union concerning immigration," says Mailer. "He succeeds through sheer stubbornness."

To Mailer, it's a unique clue in Oswald's makeup. "To succeed against an entrenched bureaucracy you have to be absolutely determined and not care about the consequences."

Arrested in New Orleans for handing out pro-Castro leaflets, in court Oswald sat in the segregated black section and sneered. "I think he had cultural connections to the South," says Mailer.

Lee Harvey Oswald brought his bride, Marina, back to America with him. He walked her around Fort Worth. He counted his dollar bills and tried to buy her pretty things.

Mailer traveled from Russia to Dallas, trying to make the shadows smaller. He went looking for Marina Oswald. He found her in, of all places, Dallas. The scene of the crime. As if held there by some kind of crazy spider web.

She's remarried. Mailer met with her five times in Dallas. "She's very bright," Mailer says.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS / MARK WILSON

**Author Norman Mailer, 72, at home with two of his less lively friends in Brooklyn.**



**Mailer in Brooklyn. Like Oswald, a fellow US Marine, the writer says he felt "angry at the military. They didn't recognize me sufficiently."**



UPI PHOTO

**Mailer says he's "75 percent sure" Lee Harvey Oswald (above) killed President Kennedy.**

"Reasonably well educated. Speaks English fluently. Speaks very quickly. She is sardonic as hell. When she read the part of the book about Minsk, she said, 'Well, Tolstoy it's not.'" Mailer laughs.

"People see this man as having no inner life," Mailer says of Oswald. "I think he had a large inner life. Hitler had a large inner life. Stalin had a large inner life. Oswald has this sense of himself being very important. I think he identified with leaders. He wouldn't have identified with Hitler's ideas, but here was Hitler, this unknown house painter who almost ends up conquering the world. That would have appealed to Oswald."

Many want to dismiss Oswald, the extra in a Shakespeare drama who bolts center stage. "People want to keep Oswald small. I don't know why," says Mailer.

It happened in a flash. An "old Negro" man later testified he saw Oswald calmly rub his hand back through his hair before firing. It was as if he was wiping away every indignity he had ever suffered. The KGB would hear about this; the CIA would hear about it.

Lee Harvey Oswald; puny no more.

Then some would-be hipster by the name of Jack Ruby comes forward and puts a bullet into Lee Harvey Oswald and Lee Harvey Oswald's life goes dark. Dropped into the shadows.

Mailer, who is "75 percent sure" Oswald killed Kennedy, believes Oswald went almost rapturously toward his date with his own defined destiny. "If he escapes he can go on and live, but no one would know about it," says Mailer. "If he's caught and stands trial he will be able to talk to the world."

...

## A different Harvard

"Oswald's Tale."

Mailer tales.

He was born in 1923 in Long Branch, N.J. He went to Harvard. He couldn't afford the place: "I had an uncle who had a little money who put me through." He believes his Harvard, which he graduated from in 1943, was a different Harvard from the Harvard of today. "It was an ideal society in those days. It was kind of like living in the world of the future. I remember very little meanness of spirit at Harvard."

His first novel, "The Naked and the Dead," published in 1948, was about war and blood. So he got those demons out of the way early in life. He became famous.

In 1968 he wrote "Armies of the Night," about the Pentagon protest the previous year. He couldn't get any more famous, but he did.

He's often referred to by his last name only. Like Garbo.

He has written enough journalism to fill a library shelf. And the 28 books. He won his first Pulitzer for "Armies of the Night."

He seems beyond awards now. He doesn't mention the Nobel, but it's all that's left. It hangs out there like a light bulb behind a curtain.

He fears the future of the American novel, of readers. "The novel came into existence the beginning of the 19th century," says Mailer. "Now it's on the edge of being replaced by TV. I'm gloomy about the future of the novelist. I think me and

colleagues are the last of the Means."

Among his books have been "Why Are We in Vietnam?" Also "Trilyn," about Monroe. Critics couldn't figure that one out. He wrote "Of Women and Their Elegance." The title explains it all. Critics really couldn't figure that one out either.

And yet it's dangerous to mock him. He can bounce back brilliantly. He won his second Pulitzer in 1980 for "The Executioner's Song." That's the book about Gary Gilmore, the Utah murderer who went to his death by firing squad.

...

## A Hemingwayesque life

He has Hemingway's stamina, only more.

There have been six wives and nine children.

He once stabbed a woman, with a penknife. Not Oswald; Mailer.

He has directed four films. He put family and friends in the movies. They were awful. At least that's what the critics thought. But he had fun.

Norman Mailer has long been fascinated with politics. Even obsessed.

In the 1969 New York Democratic primary Mailer ran for mayor. Jimmy Breslin, a Mailer friend and newspaper columnist, ran for city council president. There was drinking in the evenings. OK, sometimes there was drinking in the daytime. But they got their ideas across: fairness, equality, sanity. Mailer also said something about wanting Manhattan to be named the 51st state.

Norman Mailer did not become the mayor of New York.

Politics, these days, pains Mailer. "If I was younger and stronger I'd run for higher office to get a few things said. I think the black people are going to be our Jews if we don't watch out.

"As long as the average white lives in fear of the average black, and blacks live in a state of rage, we will have an abyss that our country will sink into."

The state of New York politics - where the Republicans are now in control - genuinely confuses him. He's a man on a rickety dock, wind-blown. George Pataki is the Republican governor and Alfonse D'Amato is a Republican senator. Mailer cringes: "There's an example of two venal guys."

Rudy Giuliani rules city hall as New York mayor. Giuliani perplexes Mailer. "To get a good take on Giuliani you have to go back and study monks of the 13th century."

The alimony suits and court battles and many wives have given a legion of celebrity journalists clear aim at Mailer.

"It's the irony of my life that I'm considered a freak." Those are not Oswald's words; they are

Mailer's, uttered two decades ago.

Still, Mailer finds his silence, gets his work done, his books written.

He appears to love, and love hugely, books and family. The dedication to his new book reads:

"To Norris, my wife, for this book and for the other seven that have been written through these warm years, these warm twenty years we have been together."

"Harlot's Ghost" stands at 1,168 pages. "Oswald's Tale" is 791 pages. But no matter. The shadows are so large. Just recently there were reports about the CIA being involved in nasty Guatemalan deeds.

And Norman Mailer is already at work on his next novel. Once again, about the CIA.

Still, so much darkness out there.

Was Oswald's shot luck, conspiracy, fate or fiction?

OSWALD'S TALE

An American Mystery

By Norman Mailer

(Random House: \$30; 848 pp.)

Reviewed by D. M. Thomas

The mystery of John F. Kennedy's assassination belongs to the world of quantum physics, in which nothing is as it seems or even as it is. Paradox is at its heart. Einstein had faith in the relativity theory because the mathematics was so simple; Niels Bohr and Wolfgang Pauli, debating a proposed quantum law before a Danish audience, had an opposite criterion: Bohr interrupting Pauli with the cry, "It's not crazy enough—it can't be right!" Pauli retorting, "It is crazy enough!" The problem with the assassination likewise is that any credible solution has to be both crazy and simple.

The simple explanation is that Lee Harvey Oswald was a screwed-up narcissist drawn to violence; by sheer coincidence he was working, in November, 1963, in a building overlooking a presidential motorcade route. More than that, it was the one spot where a tight corner would force the motorcade to slow almost to a halt. The coincidence gave Oswald his one shot at fame—and he took it. Norman Mailer in his gigantic study of Oswald comes close to endorsing this simple explanation, and it has undeniable force. Following an unusual visit to his family the night before the killing, Oswald left money for them, together with his wedding ring. He took to work a long package, which we can assume was his Italian rifle. He had previously tried to shoot the right-wing Gen. Edwin A. Walker. There is no clear-cut evidence that he was mixing either with

D.M. Thomas is a British novelist. His novels include "Flying Into Love" (Macmillan), about the Kennedy assassination, and most recently "Eating Pav'ovd" (Carroll & Graf).



Lee Harvey Oswald and his Russian bride Marina pose in Minsk soon after their marriage there. He was working in a Soviet factory and had met her at a dance. He brought her home to Texas the following year.

government intelligence or with Mafia people; generally he was a loner.

But then the inconsistencies pile in. Hunting in Minsk, he couldn't hit a rabbit from a few feet away. Expert marksmen, post-Dallas, found his rifle's sight badly adjusted; firing without pressure, they could barely emulate his deadly accuracy. What of the crowds certain the shots came from the grassy knoll? (Mailer's book must be unique in that he does not mention the grassy knoll.) What of the

"magic bullet?" The initial Parkland doctors' verdict that the front wound was an entry wound? The autopsy sketches, so inaccurate they surely had to be part of a cover-up? The suicides and suspicious deaths of David Ferrie and George De Mohrenschildt when they had been summoned to give evidence? Jack Ruby's Mafia-esque shooting of Oswald, and his desperate plea to be moved to Washington where he could tell the truth? Taking account of these factors and a host of

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others, we conclude that the simple explanation is crazy.

On the other hand, if we build an edifice of conspiracy capable of holding all the uncomfortable crazy details, we find it liable to tumble down because some very simple facts won't fit in. For example—to take one that bothers Mailer whenever he is drawn to the persuasive conclusion that Oswald was silenced: Why was Ruby wasting time sending money to a female employee, when at any moment Oswald might be moved out of his reach? The crazy explanations are not simple enough; they seem to demand a perfect functioning of intricate movements, which take no account of crass accident. America could not get a few helicopters to Iran to attempt a hostage rescue without a breakdown; yet a network of conspirators killed Kennedy, corrupted the medical and legal investigations and buried the truth, without a hitch.

So we go back to attempting to find a truth simple enough for Einstein, crazy enough for Pauli, and we find . . . the 1995 Norman Mailer model of Oswald; a man with enough dignity to be in the Shakespearean mold that Mailer wants: "The sudden death of a man as large in his possibilities as John Fitzgerald Kennedy is more tolerable if we can perceive his killer as tragic rather than absurd." It makes a difference to us, Mailer asserts, whether an act of murder is "visionless and mindless or is a cry of wrath that rises from a skewed heart maddened by its own vision of injustice."

Certainly the Oswald who emerges from Mailer's long and sometimes rambling exploration is an interesting and complex man. Partly by correcting his dyslexic misspellings, Mailer makes a good case for his having been almost "a young intellectual." Considering his poor school record he wrote in a good polemical style. Most unusual for a dyslexic, he was a copious reader. In one summer week in 1963 he borrowed from the public library Kennedy's "Profiles in Courage,"

Please see Page 13

HA's  
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NANCY GRAMPTON



Norman Mailer

Continued from Page 2  
William Manchester's biography of the president, Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," Alexander Werth's "Russia Under Khrushchev" and, for light relief, "Hornblower and the Hotspur." It strikes this reader as a very congenial, humanist selection, and it's hard to imagine that particular borrower blowing the President's brains out, a few months later.

He was a shrewd chess player, a poetic photographer. He loved Tchaikovsky's opera "The Queen of Spades." He and his wife, Marina, listened to classical music on the radio and played a game of guessing who the composer was. Often he won. It takes intelligence and sensitivity for a man from a culturally poor background to be able to distinguish Schumann from Wagner—or to want to do it. Earlier, on a troopship, Lee shared "Leaves of Grass" with a fellow Marine. One wonders whether he read and reflected on "O Captain! my captain! our fearful trip is done. . . ." The other Marine, a tough footballer and wrestler, told the Warren Commission that he felt that Oswald had a strong homosexual tendency. Mailer suggests that Oswald may have been as baffled and frustrated in his sexuality as in his intellect. Marina rarely found him up to scratch in bed, though his main problem, premature ejaculation, hardly suggests aversion.

Drawing on Edward Jay Epstein's "Legend," Mailer toys with the possibility that Oswald was involved in a sex crime. A Marine called Schrand was shot to death while on guard duty; some Marines told Epstein that they thought Oswald was involved. Mailer makes the imaginative suggestion that Schrand may have been compelling someone (a Filipino? Oswald?) to fellate him. It was a Marine tradition, Mailer asserts. The fellating victim may have grabbed the gun and fired at his tormentor. If Oswald was responsible, in such a scenario—unlikely but conceivable—"what a sense he would have had thereafter of being forever an outlaw, an undiscovered and as yet unprosecuted criminal."

We are being moved toward a concept of Oswald as Byronic anti-hero. Mailer is excellent on the exalted state of mind Oswald must have been in during the last couple of days before the motorcade. Having pointed out to us Marguerite Oswald's "full operatic passion" for her son, the author might have reminded us of Oswald's passion for "The Queen of Spades," and wondered whether some aria from that tale of an outsider, amoralist and gambler with fate was haunting him as he shot a President he admired.

Before we are carried away totally into romanticism, it is salutary to read the tart report of "Tanya," of Minsk Intourist, July 8, 1960. She notes that Oswald's range of interest is limited; that he has a "poor conception of art, music, painting, to say nothing of Marxist-Leninist theory." She has found in him "a striving to become acquainted with girls, primarily blondes, who have a command of

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English"; he is stingy, capable of dating a girl, then going to a restaurant alone to avoid the expense of paying for her. His privileged flat struck one of his girlfriends, Inna, as neat but sterile. She expected Hemingway, Faulkner or "something forbidden" on his bookshelves, but found only Marx and Lenin in English. In his troubled boyhood, a social worker reported, Lee felt "almost as if there is a veil between him and other people through which they cannot reach him but he prefers this veil to remain intact." When, on the last day of Lee's life, his brother Robert asked him what the Sam Hill was going on and gazed into his eyes to try to get an answer, Lee said quietly: "Brother, you won't find anything there."

During months of research in Minsk, Mailer looked into the eyes of that other Cold War enigma, Russia, yet didn't find much there, either. The KGB transcripts of domestic arguments between Lee and his wife show only that they rowed "fiercely and pointlessly." Oswald snarled at Marina that she was lazy and dirty, and she snapped back that he didn't help and was by far the dirtier: "Look at your pillow; you sleep on it once and it's already dirty."

**BOOK MARK**  
For an excerpt from "Oswald's Tale," see the Opinion section.

Oswald in the Soviet Union turns out to have been much the same, rather timid, nondescript, idle character he was in Texas. Of course he excited initial curiosity, but the comrades soon lost interest. Including the blondes. He had

nothing new to say to them; he would tell jokes, but they were just stupid stories. At least he kept out of trouble in the restrictive, ultra-sober Soviet town; had he stayed, he would probably by now be a shabby Belorussian provincial, playing chess, listening to music and occasionally hunting rabbits. But he didn't stay. He needed, one suspects, the violence endemic in America and its more obvious inequalities, even with a generally higher standard of life, to justify his rage.

His aging Minsk acquaintances show the normal muddle of guesswork about his guilt or innocence. "He wouldn't kill a fly. . . . Could be part of a plot, but not the killer. . . . He would have done anything to be famous. . . ." Ilya Prusakov, Marina's uncle and guardian, claimed that the assassination was organized, and that, if Oswald had been used, it was because he had been in the Soviet Union. Prusakov was an officer of military intelligence; his career suffered as a result of the family connection. He was also a bibliophile whose library included sets of Swift, Dickinson, Tagore and Proust. (And isn't that crazy, a KGB type who enjoyed Tagore and Dickinson!) Oswald did well in marrying Marina; she had a decency that has stayed the course. Mailer pays tribute to her honesty through five days of interview, painfully searching the past for shards of truth.

There are a host of intriguing shards in this epic, if overlong, exploration of a psyche—and perhaps a psycho. Yet still the past is another country, behind an iron curtain. And still the case remains open.

"Oswald's Tale" is also available, abridged on four audiocassettes, read by Norman Mailer and Norris Church Mailer (Random House: \$25).

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NY - REVIEW OF BOOKS

## The Loser's Loser

Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery

by Norman Mailer.

Random House, 791 pp., \$30.00

Robert Stone

Lee Harvey Oswald wanted his name to go down in history and he got his wish. Sometimes it seems that before all America knew those five nerdish syllables nothing could go wrong for us, while in the years since Thanksgiving time, 1963, nothing has gone quite right. This may be illusion conditioned by age, but surely there is something to it. Looking back, we seemed then to stand at noon. After the fall of John Kennedy in Dealey Plaza the shadows kept lengthening.

The man who killed Kennedy, apparently alone and unassisted by any conspiracy outside his own mad schemes, was an American type, already somewhat familiar by the early Sixties. In fact he was the mid-century extension of a certain specifically American condition.

It would not be true to say that there is a little Lee Harvey Oswald in all of us. Plenty of Americans have nothing in common with such a person. John and Jacqueline Kennedy might have come from a different planet than Oswald. But there is a little Lee Harvey Oswald in many of us.

In German, there exists a set phrase for the United States: *das Land der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten*; it was bandied about by German generals during the Second World War when the first overconfident, undertrained American troops arrived in North Africa. Translated it means "the land of endless possibility." On a level beyond irony it is a very apt phrase for a certain aspect of American life. Possibility, if you like, is the subject of Edward Hopper's paintings. It scents the wind that stirs the curtains in that city flat, lurks in the night outside the diner, is drawn in the drag on the cigarette smoked by the thin nude woman beside the window. Intoxicating, tantalizing, always potentially violent, this ineffable quality helps define us.

There are many rootless, open-ended lives in America and many children raised under the shelterless sky of possibility. Lee Harvey Oswald,

the principal subject of Norman Mailer's *Oswald's Tale*, was one. Gary Gilmore, Jack Abbott, Jack Kerouac's old friend Neal Cassady were others. They are not all outlaws but there is an outlaw breed, consisting quite often of extremely intelligent and sensitive individuals. Everyone knows a few examples. They used to abound in the military, to which many turned for order and three squares a day. Autodidacts, Nazis or fascists or Communists-manqués, wiseguys, they lived to shock everyone aboard ship or in barracks with their records of the Red Army chorus and German marches and their copies of *The Communist Manifesto* or *Mein Kampf*. They affected a cool fanaticism and a cosmopolitan sophistication, acquired at the town library and the corner Bijou. They tried to use words they'd only seen in print. When they got out they would start satanic motorcycle gangs or go to Paris to paint or become gigolos.

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Or they might be revolutionaries who, upon separation, would be straight off to Russia for instructions. They were often men of indeterminate class or ethnicity. Often they seemed not truly of their native place or region. Hillbillies raised by barmaids in Staten Island. New York boys stranded in the Arizona desert or some level of Florida hell. Booming postwar Texas produced many. They were always angry. Think of the child, Lee Oswald, mocked in a New York public school for his outlandish accent, playing hooky at the Bronx Zoo, dodging the dutiful truant officers of

those lost days, already a fantasizing loner.

It seems inevitable that Norman Mailer would do a book about Oswald and the Kennedy assassination. The combination of a violent soul lost in the void of possibility and the assassination with its vast lore of conspiracy in a promiscuous mélange of high and

low places is a natural subject for him. He has written and speculated on them before. And as Kerouac was drawn to the basically benign Neal Cassady, so has Mailer been drawn to other, darker, figures of a similar sort, like Gilmore, Abbott, and Oswald. *The Executioner's Song*, his 1979 book about Gilmore, the Utah multiple murderer, is an American classic. It is a book so beautiful and wise that its light somehow illuminates the rest of his work and legitimates his vision.

Mailer is fierce, courageous, and reckless and nearly everything he writes has sections of headlong brilliance, although the quality of his work has been uneven. Some of it has seemed paranoid or obsessive and obscure, partaking of a logic that was

always writerly but simply did not play in daylight. Often it went over the top. But after *The Executioner's Song* it became impossible to deny his stature. In this book, he made all of us, regardless of class or origin, see tragedy in the life and death of a murderous jack-Mormon thug from the gulches of the West. In Gary Gilmore, another road child, a product of brutal possibility and an utterly superfluous man, Mailer led us to recognize a son and brother.

We ought not to fault *Oswald's Tale* for not being the second coming of *The Executioner's Song*. All writers are hostage to the expectations their

best work creates. This book is far less ambitious and relies in far greater measure on verbatim interviews and matters of record. It also serves a lesser subject. Gary Gilmore did seem to burn with a terrible flame. There was an intelligence and dark excellence about the man that made him even more frightening while it lifted his condition to the level of tragedy. If anyone ever represented the thing itself, unaccommodated man gone wild and turned killer, it was Gilmore, which is what attracted Mailer in the first place, and inspired him. Lee Harvey Oswald was no Gary Gilmore. He lacked the majesty and the uncompromising malice. Above all he lacked the style. This is an unfair and amoral assessment of two murderers, but it's inescapably relevant when we consider a book. Intrigues and mysteries notwithstanding, Oswald was a lesser

Norman Mailer



figure in dramatic terms.

Lee Harvey Oswald, as he appears in *Oswald's Tale*, was a loser's loser whose chance of fame would always be proportional to his willingness to self-destruct. He would never prove a

lover or a hero; his options were only shades of villainy, something which he naturally failed to understand. In the Marine Corps, he was just another one of those mouthy sea lawyers full of pseudo-intellectual yammer about their far-out politics, one of the revolutionaries who would go to Russia when they got out. The difference between Oswald and the rest was that he actually went. And then, instead of skulking home when his money ran out, he insisted on staying, even to the point of making a superficial suicidal

gesture when he was asked to leave. He was determined to achieve the status of "defector." This was a man whose only gift was the wit to compound his mistakes exponentially. A man to turn a personal fuck-up into a national disaster and make his problems everybody's.

*Oswald's Tale* often shows Mailer at his best, which means that reading it has many rewards. Mailer and his associate Larry Schiller were able to obtain a large amount of KGB material, including tapes from the bugged apartment in Minsk where Oswald lived and where he began his life with Marina. This was probably facilitated by the fact that Minsk, Oswald's Soviet residence, fell to the independent state of Belarus after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the local authorities acquired the KGB's records. Using them and interviews he recorded with various people who knew Oswald during his period in Moscow and Minsk, Mailer provides a vivid sense of life in the former Soviet Union circa 1960. If it was not nasty, brutish, and short, it was certainly cheerless and dull.

This narrative is about as sympathetic to Oswald as anything published. Marguerite Oswald, the neurotic, narcissistic woman who raised him in her image, makes several memorable appearances. Oswald's dyslexia is discussed, and the degree to which that disorder can trap an intelligent person in the appearance of incoherency and deeply embitter him. Mailer throughout argues convincingly for Oswald's intelligence, in spite of the man's subliterate journals and correspondence.

The recorded accounts, balanced by the author's novelistic style, make it impossible not to feel sorry for this very young man—barely twenty—with his spite and naiveté and childish pride, adrift in the utterly foreign, Orwellian landscape of post-Stalinist Russia. Even an intelligent paranoid like Oswald could scarcely have imagined the degree of official scrutiny to which he was subject during this period. Suspecting a CIA plant, the KGB followed him relentlessly, analyzed tapes of his recorded conversations, received regular reports from informers among his associates, and even drilled a peephole commanding a view of his apartment from an adjoining flat to supplement the bug al-

ready installed. Eventually this gave them insight, not to say oversight, into the honeymoon period of Oswald's marriage.

Meanwhile, Oswald did his best to look at the bright side, kept up his journal, and took an assigned job at the Minsk radio factory, where his performance was lackadaisical enough to cause negative comment. A lonely, fatherless mama's boy, he searched for

a nurturing woman and came up with Marina, who, according to interviews quoted by Mailer, may or may not have been a one-time Leningrad hooker but who was definitely a canny soul and tough cookie in search of security and respectability. For that, Lee was hardly her man but her survival skills would be drawn upon severely. In being sympathetic to Lee, *Oswald's Tale* is also sympathetic to Marina and presents her side of the story. For Marina's version of events, Mailer uses interviews with Marina taped during the 1970s by Larry Schiller and also Priscilla McMillan's book *Marina and Lee*.

The ex-Soviet dimension provides almost all the new information in the book, giving us a sense of how young Oswald looked to Russians, official and unofficial. It's also the most entertaining. Mailer has found a way to make the dry bones of KGB tapes and his own interviews stand up and perform. His Englishing of the Russian originals is extremely lucid; the picture of Soviet life provided by the recorded material and his observations is particularly lively and convincing. Characters come across with extraordinary vividness and some are memorable.

The old Soviet Union was very much a land of euphemism, circumlocution, and terrified discretion, and in the wake of the assassination just about anyone who set eyes on Oswald was questioned. In the course of its own investigation, the KGB still had time to straighten out such hooliganism as incorrect reading habits on the part of Oswald's acquaintances when it came to their attention. One Golovachev, a fellow factory worker of Oswald's, apparently already in trouble over his friendly correspondence with Marina Oswald in Dallas, is discovered in passing to have read Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, then on the index of for-

bidden books. The KGB record of his interrogation states:

In answer to a question about how *Doctor Zhivago* had attracted his attention, GOLOVACHEV explained that he had wanted to familiarize himself with this book purely out of curiosity, in order to have some idea about that work. It was explained to GOLOVACHEV that it was a conclusion of prominent Soviet literary critics, writers, and other persons who had familiarized themselves with Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* that it contained slanders of Soviet reality and was not of artistic value. Therefore, GOLOVACHEV's acquaintance with the book *Doctor Zhivago* would not enrich his knowledge but, to the contrary, would lead him to have false notions about particular issues.

Is there deliberate irony in such declarations? Probably not, except to the extent that all communication between the secret police and the Soviet citizenry was part of an ongoing ironic dialogue.

Fortunately, perhaps, for Golovachev, his mother was present with maternal strictures to appease "the Organs."

"MRS. GOLOVACHEV," the record goes on to state, "sharply criticized GOLOVACHEV's desire to read *Doctor Zhivago*, noting that no decent per-

son would waste his time on such a book."

The same hapless Golovachev then has the disastrous notion of writing Marina a letter of condolence after the assassination and Oswald's own killing by Jack Ruby. His letter gets no further than the Minsk post office and it's no more Mister Nice Guy down at the KGB.

They let him sit in a chair. They were very polite; they didn't beat him.... He was sitting in a room with a big table, and there were a lot of officers and bodyguards around, maybe seven people.

They started by telling him: "In our country, only representatives of the people can send sympathies. You are not a representative of our people. You have no right to express sympathy.... If you don't want somebody to write

the laws of our country on your back, if you want to see some sky again, then stop doing stupid things."

They inquire at length into Golovachev's relationship with Marina.

"Why did you write this kind of letter if you didn't sleep with her? Are you crazy?"

Has the KGB man quoted read Kafka? *The Penal Colony* perhaps, in which malefactors have their transgressions engraved on their bodies? But Golovachev, as a character, is more Gogol than Kafka.

Describing a pseudonymous Minsk KGB official the author writes:

How Igor Ivanovich Guzman looked when young would be hard to decide in 1993, because his presence spoke of what he was now—a retired general from KGB Counterintelligence, a big man and old, with a red complexion and a large face that could have belonged to an Irish police chief in New York, impressive from his sharp nose up, with pale blue eyes ready to blaze with rectitude, but he looked corrupt from the mouth down—he kept a spare tire around his chin, a bloated police chief's neck.

That description is vintage Mailer, but it's not until the book shifts its focus to the Texas killing ground that *Oswald's Tale* becomes a work peculiar to Mailer's concerns. Mailer is one of the few ideologues left in American letters. The development of his ideological system seems very roughly to have progressed from a fairly conventional Marxism in the Forties through a variety of Trotskyism and then, via Wilhelm Reich, into a system that somehow transposed sexual energy into the traditional role of the laboring masses as an engine of liberation. Sex, rather than class, is key.

Not surprisingly, then, he searches like a haruspex through various sexual clues scattered in the available material. One such, a rather haunting one, turns up back in Minsk and has to do with Lee and Marina.

Neither Igor [the KGB man described above] nor Stepan [a second agent] would admit to more than some early concern about Lee and Marina. When that romance developed quickly into marriage,

it could be said, Igor admitted, that they did lose some sleep, and felt somewhat at fault that no steps had been taken to keep this courtship of Oswald and Marina Prusakova from flourishing.

When asked what such steps might have entailed, Igor's response was deliberative, even delicate. There were girls, he suggested, some of them attractive certainly, certainly, who at one stage or another could be called upon by the Organs. Perhaps one of them might have diverted Oswald. They also could have attracted Marina perhaps to some other person, some very attractive man qualified for such activity. They didn't do that, however.

Since the KGB men are nowhere represented as telling the whole truth, this discreet evocation of "the Organs'" powers of sexual manipulation is enough to give anyone pause, the more so because Marina herself, when we take account of her Leningrad experiences and background, sounds a bit like such an attractive person. Was she put somehow in Oswald's path? But Mailer does not suggest that, nor is there any evidence for it.

Tracing Oswald's short life, the book examines the possibility of his homosexuality, a factor that might, if present, explain some of his history and connections. As a teen-ager he was a member of a unit of the Civil Air Patrol, a vaguely paramilitary scout movement whose New Orleans chapter was supervised by one David Ferrie, a known seducer of young boys later dismissed by the CAP for that reason. Ferrie had connections to various figures in New Orleans lowlife and gumshoe circles, such as the Carlos Marcello Mafia outfit and the private eye Guy Banister, who loom large in assassination conspiracy theory. However, as Mailer says, there is no evidence of any sexual relations between Oswald and Ferrie during Oswald's adolescence and no evidence that they ever met in later life. Mailer also speculates on possible homosexual experiences Oswald may have had in the Marine Corps, even to the point of imagining Oswald's shooting a fellow Marine in the act of fellatio. This scenario suggests a strong, grim scene from an unwritten Mailer novel, but

it's left undeveloped as fiction and not seriously proposed as fact.

Sometimes the sexual line of inquiry is baffling and touches the occult. At one point *Oswald's Tale* describes Marina "with her deep if unfocused intuitions about magical matters" living in Dallas squalor with a small baby, having had six teeth extracted and feeling guilty about the car accident in which a local Russian acquaintance was injured. She's sleeping late mornings, earning the disapproval of the Oswalds' small, generally unsympathetic circle of Russian acquaintances, and Mailer imagines his way into her condition.

There was a series of obsessions to encounter each night, including the bottomless question—"What do I do next with my existence?"

Paradoxically, her sexual life may have been stimulated. Curses that prove successful open the gates to libido. (Otherwise there would be no warlocks.)

This mystical formulation is not elaborated upon at any point, and for a moment a reader may wonder whether he's reading about Lee and Marina or Parsifal and Kundry. However, Mailer is quite scrupulous in distinguishing between the sections in which he has allowed his novelist's speculation free rein and those in which he is examining the established evidence.

This scrupulousness holds throughout, and his weighing of the facts seems to lead Mailer to the conclusion, if I read correctly, that Oswald did indeed act alone in assassinating Kennedy. He also insists that the CIA contacted Oswald upon his return from Russia and considered using him somehow. The argument offered, turning on the existence of some unlikely friendships, is strong.

Oswald's curious relationship with the veteran intriguer George De Mohrenschildt will always fascinate conspiracy buffs. Did De Mohrenschildt really go to Yale with Rudy Vallee? Apparently. Is this relevant to the Kennedy assassination? God knows, because the career of De Mohrenschildt, an oil engineer and White Russian petty nobleman who befriended the Oswalds in Dallas, is replete with odd significances that

vanish furiously in all directions. As a young man he had been acquainted with Jacqueline Bouvier. He was said to have been employed by the intelligence services of five countries, all of whom suspected him of double or triple dealing.

From one point of view, it makes no sense that he would befriend impoverished and undereducated losers like the Oswalds. From another, it seems logical that as a bored Russian adventurer stranded in Godforsaken Dallas, Texas, and the self-appointed leader of the minuscule Russian community there, De Mohrenschildt might be curious about them. He almost certainly had connections with the CIA, whatever these may have been. As a secret agent, his untrustworthiness and garrulousness were world-renowned. Years later he committed suicide during a period when he was being interviewed about the assassination. Unfortunately for history he was not only an ambiguous figure but often certifiably insane. (His antic presence is one of those which will make the buffs and bet-settlers who read *Oswald's Tale* weep tears of frustration over the book's lack of index.)

Each time Mailer extends the line of conspiracy, it's within the special sphere he has reserved for novelistic imagining. Again and again he spins out conspiracy scenarios which, like a good novelist, he makes psychologically convincing but which he presents without evidence or even much conviction. Rendering the factual record, almost in contrast, he seems to abandon the exotic possibilities with regret.

Searching for purpose in the life and death of Oswald early on in the book, Mailer writes:

It is virtually not assimilable to our reason that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a non-entity destroyed the leader of the

most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd. So the question reduces itself to some degree: If we should decide that Oswald killed Kennedy by himself, let us at least try to comprehend whether he was an assassin with a vision or a killer without one.

Many pages later, Mailer returns to the moral intention underlying his book and the motive behind his continual sifting of unproven and unprovable theories of conspiracy: "It is possible," he writes,

that the working hypothesis has become more important to the author than trying to discover the truth. For if Oswald remains intact as an important if dark protagonist, one has served a purpose: The burden of a prodigious American obsession has been lessened, and the air cleared of an historic scourge—absurdity. So long as Oswald is a petty figure, a lone twisted pathetic killer who happened to be in a position to kill a potentially great President, then, as has been argued earlier in this work, America is cursed with an absurdity. There was no logic to the event and no sense of balance in the universe. Historical absurdity (like the war in Vietnam) breeds social disease.

"Given the yeast-like propensities of conspiracy to expand and expand as

one looks to buttress each explanation, it can hardly be difficult for the reader to understand," Mailer continues, "why it is more agreeable to keep to one's developing concept of Oswald as a protagonist, a man to whom, grudgingly, we must give a bit of stature when we take into account the modesty of his origins. That, to repeat, can provide us with a sense of the tragic rather than of the absurd. If a figure as large as Kennedy is cheated abruptly of his life, we feel better, inexplicably better, if his killer is also not without size. Then, to some degree, we can also mourn the loss of possibility in the man who did the deed. Tragedy is vastly preferable to absurdity."

From the American master conjurer of dark and swirling purpose, this is a moving reflection. It is as though Mailer, a major celebrator of the heroic mode, the heir of Hemingway in life and art who added the mystique of sexuality to the older traditions of stoicism and courage, has found the world a lesser place than he had hoped. The slain Prince, the all-powerful Mafia, the ultra-diabolical CIA, the armed fanatic, all those figures whose shadows have informed our history and his work, seem suddenly reduced from the vast form they took in the vision he now reluctantly surrenders. It is as though American possibility has somehow failed him.

The fact is that, in the land of endless possibility, absurdity and common death gape far wider beneath us than high conspiracy, tragedy, or sacrifice. □

# On the trail of Lee Harvey Oswald

*Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner — and Long Branch native — Norman Mailer talks about his three-year quest to tell "Oswald's Tale."*

By STEVE GIEGERICH  
PRESS STAFF WRITER

**N**orman Mailer, and there's certainly nothing unusual about this, begged to disagree. A disembodied voice belonging to one of several journalists on the line via conference call hinted that maybe, just maybe, the 24 years Lee Harvey Oswald spent on this Earth did not merit a book numbering 791 pages in length. Not including the appendix.

Until that juncture, the 72-year-old Mailer had been positively beatific, an avuncular Uncle Norman gently fielding the interrogation of literary underlings. After all, those mired in the grind of daily journalism were unlikely to attain the status of "American Tolstoy," a monicker attached to Mailer by the Russians during his research for "Oswald's Tale, An American Mystery" (Random House).

Now Mailer was on the spot: an unabashed admirer of John F. Kennedy placed in the untenable position of having to defend the profundity of the man who, in the

eyes of all but dedicated conspiracy buffs, stands accused of being the sole assassin of the president.

"This is not a small man. He may be a very bad man, but he is not a small man. He did not have a lot of personality, but he was not a nerd," said Mailer.

Lee Harvey Oswald as nerd. Quite a concept. Over the past 32 years our perception of Oswald has ranged from psychopath to dupe to drifter to loser. It took Mailer a nanosecond to raise and then dispel the notion that Oswald was a nerd.

"A weak loser." That's the way the questioner phrased it. As in "Do you have a problem, Mr. Mailer, reconciling the fact that a weak loser may have changed the course of human history?"

## Mailer on Oswald:

*"He's an incredible character. One would hope to find a character like that for a novel."*

Mailer scoffed. He cleared his throat.

"A weak loser," he intoned, modulating

the inflection so that he sounded like a professor unexpectedly called upon to expand on a long-held conviction, "does not go to the Soviet Union at the age of 19. He does not have the fortitude to fight two bureaucracies to get him back to the United States."

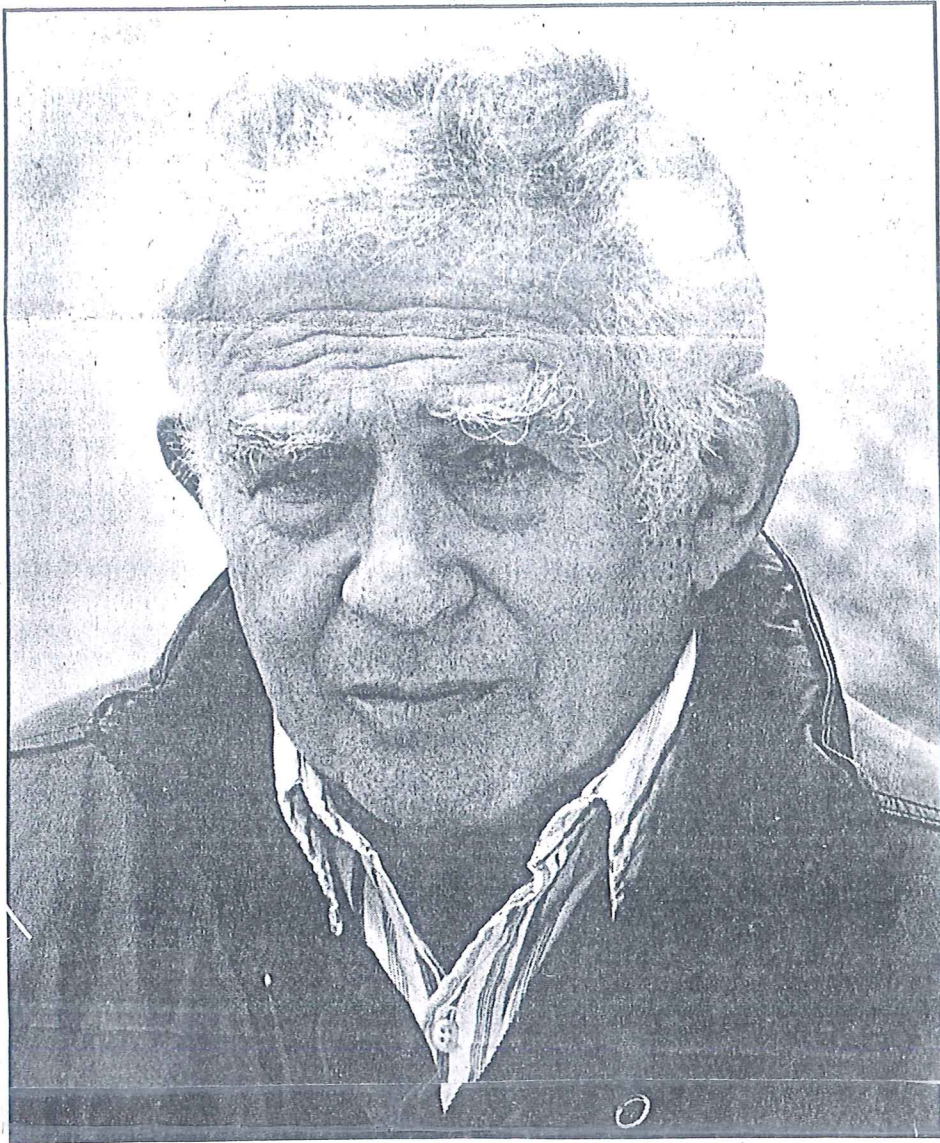
The line of questioning was temporarily abandoned; the image of Oswald the nerd lingered.

Hindsight makes it easy to see that Lee Harvey Oswald and Norman Mailer have been on a collision course for three decades. Mailer, with a life lived on the fringe, has long sought out those of a similar persuasion when he's turned his talents to non-fiction. Whereas Mailer walks a fine line, his subjects — notably Marilyn Monroe and killer Gary Gilmore — have skidded over the edge.

With 27 books and two Pulitzer Prizes to his credit, the Long Branch-born author, who splashed into the American literary consciousness in 1948 with his novel "The Naked and the Dead," turned again to non-fiction — which he professes to prefer — for "Oswald's Tale." His last novel was 1991's mammoth CIA tale, "Harlot's Ghost."

"I find non-fiction much easier," Mailer said. "You can pick and choose with non-fiction."





**Norman Mailer:** “(Oswald) was a man of fascinating opposites.”

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tion. Plus you have the great advantage that God or providence wrote the story. And God or providence is a better novelist.”

For “Oswald’s Tale,” providence came paradoxically to Mailer in the form of a once “evil” and godless empire. When Mailer and fellow researcher Larry Schiller arrived in Moscow in the fall of 1992, they found in

Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union an abundant trove of suppressed information.

They were given unprecedented access to just-unsealed KGB files (Mailer doubts a KGB/Oswald link to the assassination and assumes that, in the unlikely event such a relationship existed, the KGB purged its files before making the data available to journalists). And in Minsk — where the expatriated Oswald lived, worked and fell in love with Marina Prusakov — they found sources who had waited a long, long time to tell their stories.

Immediately after JFK's assassination, the KGB — understandably concerned that even the most tenuous connection could escalate into something much larger — let it be known that the Oswald friends and acquaintances who chose to speak freely would do so at considerable personal risk. Three decades later, when Schiller and Mailer showed up in a Belarus liberated from Soviet influence, tales held inside for 35 years gushed forth.

"The best interviews I've ever had," said Mailer.

Much of what Mailer unearthed from KGB files or culled from interviews (including five days spent in Dallas with Marina Os-

wald) illuminates little more about Oswald's time in the Soviet Union than a tedious existence in a country Mailer depicts as a "sad, dreary place to grow up." The KGB dossier — Oswald was tailed during most of his stay in Minsk — borders on drudgery. So, too, does Oswald's personal diary of his stay there, which he

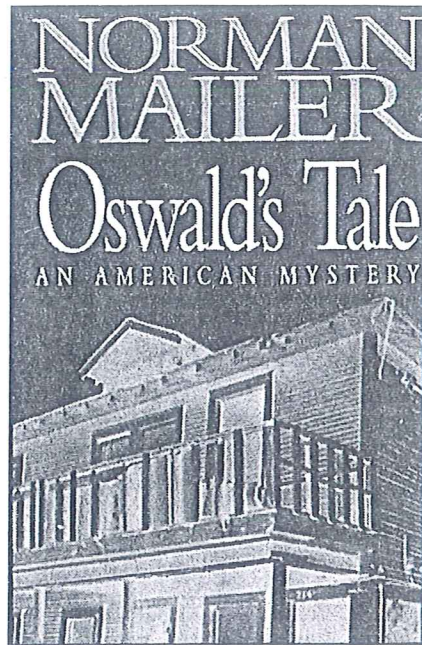
began as a disgruntled 19-year-old former U.S. Marine in 1959.

Even Mailer admits that the transcripts detailing the early stages of Lee and Marina's relationship depict a "very ordinary marriage of two people who, like many other people, are half in and half out of love with each other ... it reads like a Samuel Beckett play."

From that drudgery (Oswald's sole extraordinary act after arriving in

Moscow was a feeble and probably fake suicide attempt in an effort to gain sympathy and permanent entry to the Soviet Union), Mailer has found a character he describes as "absolutely fascinating."

"He's an incredible character. One would hope to find a character like that for a novel. He was a man of fascinating opposites," said Mailer, drawing attention to Oswald's pendular swings from socialist to anti-Communist sentiments. He predicted that had Oswald not "re-written history, he'd have had a role in Haight-Ashbury about six years later." Not that six years later anyone's role in Haight-Ashbury could be construed as anything out of the ordinary.



Were Oswald alive today, Mailer has little doubt he would fit squarely into the mold of disenchanted white male. In other words, Timothy McVeigh.

Mailer says that, after 30 years, he isn't asking readers to embrace the first of the many "dangerous loners" who have since crossed and altered the American path. Rather, he wants them to look at the bigger picture, to see and understand Oswald in the context of the psychological and social complexities that shape the human animal.

For a man obsessed — and Mailer has been obsessed by nearly everything at one point or another — it would seem it took an inordinate amount of time for him to foment an obsession with JFK's murder. After all it is a subject that has long fascinated and puzzled lesser obsessives and creative minds — witness Oliver Stone. Mailer says he was at first, of course, horrified by the assassination, but that it eventually came to fascinate him.

Now, of course, everyone wants to know how Mailer weighs in on the big question. Did Oswald do it?

Mailer thinks he did.

Alone?

"There's a likelihood but I certainly wouldn't swear to it," said Mailer, as equivocal as he's likely ever to be.

## The Mailer Commission

BY PAUL BERMAN

### Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery by Norman Mailer

(Random House, 829 pp., \$30)

The key is the subtitle, "An American Mystery." In case you miss his point, Norman Mailer tells us that during her years in Minsk, Marina Prusakova, who will later marry Lee Harvey Oswald, regarded Theodore Dreiser as her favorite writer—preferred him to Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev and everyone else. And if that is still not clear enough, at the very end of the book Mailer invokes *An American Tragedy* by name, just to hammer home the nail.

Dreiser is famous for indulging in gassy philosophical posturings, repetitions, wordiness and all kinds of gaucheries that are perhaps not as gauche as they appear; but beneath the seeming awkwardness he was, in his way, a writer of extreme discipline. The efficiency consisted of piling up tiny physical details and noting every possible petty motive and impulse in order to

show that human events are driven by irresistible material forces—sometimes by the pressures of social class, sometimes by "chemisms" from within the individual personality. The tiny details and physical urges grow denser and denser, the protagonist of *An American Tragedy*, Clyde Griffiths, moves ever closer to the half-fumbled murder of his girlfriend and then toward his own execution, and you, the reader, sink ever deeper into your armchair of anxiety and dread. It is because everything seems so horribly unavoidable.

Mailer is much nimbler than Dreiser, but in *An American Mystery* he, too, adopts an awkward prose, advertised at the start in a note to the readers, like one of those explanations of Russian patronymics that precede the translation of a Russian novel. Only Mailer's note explains that, in order to retain a properly Russian mood, the writer will delete a few definite and indefinite articles,

Russian-style, and take, as he says, "small liberties with King's English," which is a habit that turns out to be rich in humor and pathos. And with the ungainliness wittily established, he plunges into his story of Oswald's defection to the Soviet Union in 1959, the marriage to Marina in Minsk, the history of Marina's family, the return from the Soviet Union and the arrival in Dallas in 1963 and all the rest—and Mailer, too, exactly like Dreiser, focuses with obsessive attentiveness on certain kinds of tiny physical details and petty motives.

He begins with police procedures. The KGB, professionally suspicious of Oswald, sets out to tail, bug and generally observe and analyze him from the moment of his arrival on Soviet soil, with documentary results that Mailer has been able to examine (and to confirm by interviewing a couple of the agents on the case). These agents want to know if Oswald's ignorance of the Russian language is merely a pretense, disguising a well-trained master spy's knowledge. That can be discovered by noticing any inexplicable forward leaps in his progress at learning the language. They learn that Oswald has bought a gun and gone hunting and has failed to hit a single thing. "How was it that a former Marine with a Sharpshooter rating back in his U.S. Marine Corps—yes, KGB had information that he was not a bad shot—could miss his targets so?" It is puzzling. "If they had had any inkling that he would later be suspected of carrying out a crime of high magnitude—of highest magnitude!—they would have studied his marksmanship in a more detailed manner." But they study everything else.

We see the petty chemists of sex. The tizzy in the KGB that is set off by Oswald's arrival in the Soviet Union is matched by a tizzy among the young women of Moscow and Minsk. "How do we get to meet this guy?" they ask. And Mailer records the results with more exactitude than you would think possible (except that his collaborator, Lawrence Schiller, familiar to Mailer's readers as the interviewer behind *The*

*Executioner's Song*, is evidently a genius at bringing out the little points). We learn that the pretty young women sent in Oswald's direction by the Soviet tourist agency (with the KGB in the background, naturally) are not unattracted themselves, though nothing more than hand-patting ever takes place. We learn that Oswald is drawn to small-boned women, though at one point he takes up with a big-boned one. He proposes marriage to a fellow radio factory worker (his own diary records: "a silky black-haired Jewish beauty with fine dark eyes,

learn about the middle-aged Minsker who, in the mid-1990s, still sighs for the Marina Prusakova of more than thirty years ago. We even get a sense of the sex life of Mr. and Mrs. Oswald in the privacy of their home, since the KGB rented the privacy of the home next door, and the transcripts of what they recorded end up in Mailer's hands. Marina herself offers a few recollections.

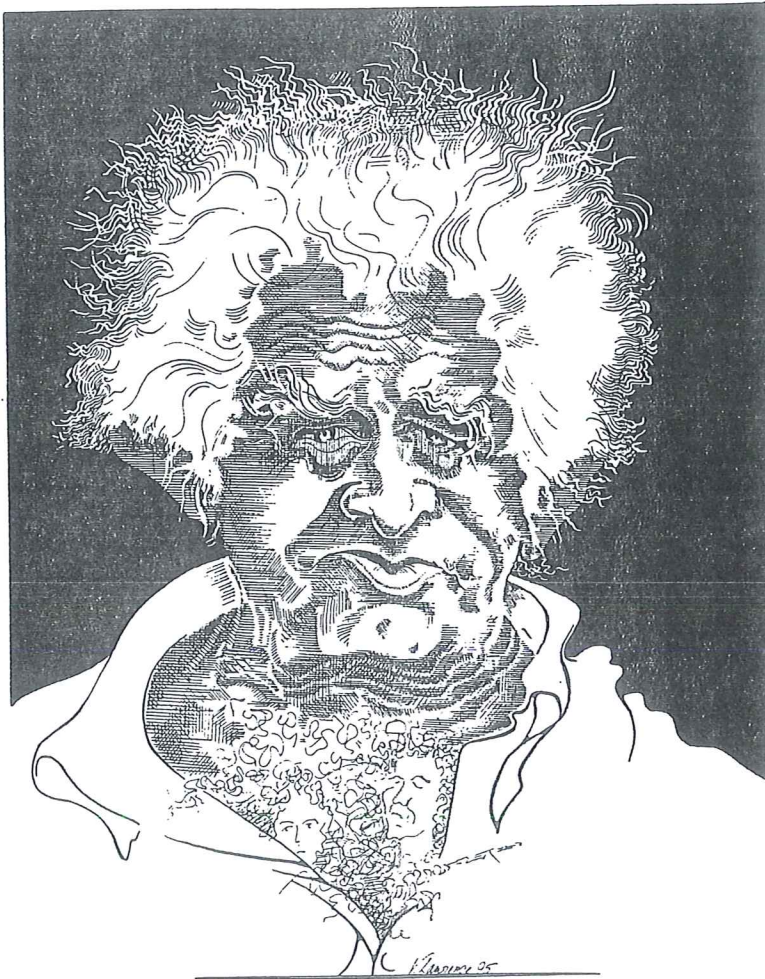
You might wonder: Why so little attention in Mailer's book to international politics, the personalities of world leaders, the effects of social class or a dozen other possible influences on events? But what he provides is entirely sufficient. The operations of a secret police bureaucracy and the urgings of sex and sexual customs turn out to have in common the quality of being unstoppable, pitiless and concentrated on ridiculously minuscule details. And through the double lens of these details, we begin to detect a Dreiser-like universe where a thousand tiny irresistible forces are at work, and the universe has a shape, and its shape is not very appealing, and nothing good is going to come of all this.

Then again, we also detect a few un-Dreiserian anomalies. In the first, more brilliant part of Mailer's book, "Oswald in Minsk with Marina," the characters are police agents, radio factory workers, Oswald's various girlfriends, Marina's aunt and uncle and other residents of Minsk, all of whom live fairly normal existences, though constrained by a nearly

inconceivable (to Americans) housing shortage. But behind the gray normality we see, in the historical background, the faces of Nazi soldiers from the Second World War, prison camps run by the German army, mass exterminations. We learn almost casually that, when the Jews of Minsk were buried in a mass grave, the ground continued to shift because some of those buried people were still alive. This is not so normal.

skin as white as snow... still a virgin"). But the black-haired beauty prefers men with wider shoulders.

We learn a good deal about Marina's sexual history, possibly more than was ever true: her persecution as a teenager by oafish machos in Leningrad; her friend the Leningrad prostitute, and her own drift in that direction, sufficient to cadge meals out of men and to cause a lot of malicious gossip about her in Minsk; her rape by an Afghani who took her for an already-paid prostitute; her loves and flirtations. We learn that, at least with one of her lovers, she won't do oral sex. No foot fetishism, either. We



NORMAN MAILER BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

uncle who brings her up works, as we discover, in the particular field of industry that manufactures furniture with prison labor. This is not the atmosphere that you find in the grim Indiana naturalism of Theodore Dreiser. In *An American Tragedy*, the destiny created by chemisms and class forces accounts for nearly everything that happens, and we see a universe that is hard and cruel and perfectly intelligible. But in *An American Mystery*, the sexual tastes and police procedures can plausibly account for only a certain portion of Soviet life, and beyond that portion a principle of insanity seems to govern, and nothing is intelligible.

Something odd occupies the center of Mailer's picture, too. Lee Harvey leaves us a little baffled, not because of some failing on the author's part. The Oswald who boasts about being named after Robert E. Lee and then becomes a Communist sympathizer; then joins the Marines; then defects to the Soviet Union; then attempts suicide; then quietly goes about his working-class life in Minsk; then marries a Russian girl while secretly planning to defect from his defection—this figure is impossible to understand in any conventional way. We begin to suspect that, if lunacy on the scale of powerful dictatorships is hovering around the periphery of Mailer's normal Soviet world, another lunacy, on the scale of a single pathetic individual, is hovering at the very center, in the person of Oswald himself.

But neither the peripheral lunacies nor the central one are ever treated as such. In the Soviet Union, people live their lives as if a background of Nazi extermination and Gulag terror were an ordinary past for ordinary citizens; and in the Soviet Union and in America, too, people meet Oswald and accept him as just another dull and uninteresting feature of a colorless world (though we do observe an occasional person noticing that Oswald is, in the words of a State Department memo about him from 1962, "an unstable character, whose actions are entirely unpredictable"). One day in New Orleans Oswald takes his rifle and shoots at General Edwin A. Walker, then returns home, explains to Marina what he has done and goes to sleep; and, though she is shocked and upset, she, too, decides it is time to sleep and climbs into the bed "where he was spread out, arms and legs extended, his bare bottom up, his backside open to the night air." And from a steady accumulation of incidents like that a very un-Dreiserian anxiety begins to exude. *An American Tragedy* makes us worry that the universe is determined; *An American Mystery* makes us worry that it is not.

That is the difference between tragedy and mystery.

We begin to worry about Mailer himself (which has, of course, always been a technique of his, not always perfectly controlled). He seems to be, at some level, a man of such good sense—but what are we to make of those insistent sexual details? We read onward, expecting them to be the road to Dallas. But the pages turn and Dallas seems no closer, and we start to wonder why he is going on at such length. A man named Yuri tells locker-room tall tales about Marina's super-promiscuity and hooker past, which Mailer himself eventually dismisses as so much blarney. But the dismissal comes late, and meanwhile we get the blarney, and we begin to wonder if Mailer, too, isn't a locker-room tale-teller, enjoying the sex talk for its own titillation and not for any larger purpose.

At one point Marina herself—the Marina of today, the Texas matron, exhausted by five days of questions from the Mailer research team—is asked whether she had used something from a pharmacy to convince Lee of her virginity on their wedding night. And she explodes: "Okay. It's true. So? So you are a sex pervert to spend five days to get somebody to talk about subject like this." And we suspect she may be on to something. She is asked about Lee's performance as a lover, and she explodes again: "Nobody asks Jacqueline Kennedy what Jack Kennedy was like in bed." A good point! But that only adds one more layer of strangeness to what Mailer has done. Literary naturalism in its heyday was always devoted to an obsessional concern with a tiny number of elements of life—Dreiser's chemisms and social classes, Zola's family genetics, Jack London's Darwinian struggle. But instead of noticing the obsessional quality, you were supposed to see in it a scientific approach to reality (and with these writers that is exactly what you see). In Mailer's book on Oswald, however, the author himself, by means of that angry accusation from Marina, draws your attention to the obsessive aspect of his own hunt for intrusive details.

The result is a book in which the immediate backgrounds that are historical and political radiate demonic evil; in which the central protagonist, Oswald, appears to be a free molecule of insanity, circulating around the universe on the basis of no identifiable principle; in which the narrative method of the book itself gives off an occasional shimmer of sexual prurience; yet which is written in a tone of sheer fact-accumulation (for the most part). It is as if we were pretending

still to be living in an era of scientific rationality, when all the while we see with perfect clarity that ours is an era beyond any possibility of rational explanation.

Mailer has the discipline to say almost nothing about the larger political or social meaning of Kennedy's assassination, aside from a few wearisome remarks about Kennedy as the finest specimen of man that America could claim. But even those of us with no patience for the romantic Kennedy cult come to the book all too aware of the damage done to American society by Oswald's deed. On the topic of superpower rivalry, Mailer likewise refrains from saying very much. But the story that he tells makes us think about it anyway, and about the lurking possibility of Hot War (which is alluded to only once, when Mailer tells us that Lyndon Johnson took a plane from Dallas back to Washington with unseemly haste out of concern that Kennedy's assassination might just possibly have been a first step in a Soviet military attack). And so, this very clever narrative structure of Mailer's, this seemingly frozen determinism surrounded by hot insanity, turns out to be something of a metaphor, and we see in it the history of totalitarianism and the fragility of American society and the scary unpredictability of a cold war in which Kennedy's assassination was merely an exceptionally nutty episode.

About the second part of *Oswald's Tale*, "Oswald in America," Mailer himself offers a bit of an apology, with the explanation that everything he has found in the ex-Soviet Union was fresh and new (if only because the Soviet window on the Kennedy assassination was boarded up until Mailer himself and his team were allowed to peer through it), whereas every corner of Oswald's life in America has been searched a thousand times. For that reason the first part is based almost entirely on fresh investigations, and the second part is based in large part on Mailer's reworking of books by other authors, supplemented by excerpts from the encyclopedic Warren Commission hearings (a "Britannica devoted to only one subject") and additional interviews by himself and his team. But the main difference has to do with Mailer's greater willingness, in the American part, to hazard a few flights of his own imagination.

Some of these merely take the sexual investigations from the Russian part and push them beyond the realm of evidence, mostly by suggesting that Oswald, deep beneath his heterosexual exterior, is homosexually inclined (which, due to the extreme homophobic spirit of the age, might help explain why he goes

crazy). Anything is possible, but in Oswald's case, the main reason to think so is some ribbing about homosexuality that he received in the Marine Corps, plus the fact that someone once saw him attend a drag show. Anybody who has read Randy Shilts's *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military*, will know, however, that military homosexuality consists of a vast subculture whose secret participants are anything but secret to one another. It's hard to imagine that after thirty years, with many excellent civic reasons for standing up and revealing the truth, none of those secret participants would have stood up, unless there is, on this matter, no truth to reveal. Mailer tells us that one of Oswald's fellow Marines was unaccountably murdered during Oswald's tour of duty, and he speculates that Oswald himself might have killed the man in the course of a sexual act, but that is sheerest guesswork on Mailer's part, and the lack of any evidence at all serves only to make us raise an eyebrow at the author's daffy theorizing.

Some other speculations stand on surer ground. Mailer proposes to take Oswald seriously, to look for a more-or-less reasonable motive in him or at least a motive that can be appreciated as some kind of human impulse, and by guessing about Oswald in that manner, Mailer stumbles on some striking evidences of Oswald's loony grandiosity—his affirmation, for instance, that, come the revolution, he will have no interest in assuming state power, which is egomaniacally modest of him to say. But having turned up a few insights, Mailer can't help himself, and in a couple of passages, he gives us a whiff of his own personal philosophy. "Let us recognize," he tells us (and now the gas rises from the page),

that it makes some difference to our commonweal, each and every time, whether an act of murder is visionless and mindless or is a cry of wrath that rises from a skewed heart maddened by its own vision of injustice.

We have come at least to the philosophical crux of our inquiry: It would state that the sudden death of a man as large in his possibilities as John Fitzgerald Kennedy is more tolerable if we can perceive his killer as tragic rather than absurd.

More than 400 pages later (the entire book is more than 800 pages, if you count the notes), he returns to the theme, in considering the possibility that Oswald may figure within a larger conspiracy:

Given the yeast-like propensities of conspiracy to expand and expand as one looks to buttress each explanation, it can hardly be difficult for the reader to understand

why it is more agreeable to keep to one's developing concept of Oswald as a protagonist, a man to whom, grudgingly, we must give a bit of stature when we take into account the modesty of his origins. That, to repeat, can provide us with a sense of the tragic rather than the absurd. If a figure as large as Kennedy is cheated abruptly of his life, we feel better, inexplicably better, if his killer is also not without size. . . . Tragedy is vastly preferable to absurdity. Such is the vested interest that adheres to perceiving Oswald as a tragic and infuriating hero (or, if you will, anti-hero) rather than as a snarling little wife-abuser or a patsy.

But these passages make no sense at all, if the rest of the book is to be believed. For though Mailer has not wasted our time in trying to take Oswald seriously, the principal result of those inquiries has been to discover an unbridgeable incoherence in Oswald's thinking. The assassin *was* a snarling little wife-abuser, and he was *not* a hero, nor an anti-hero, judging by Mailer's own study of the man. Tragedy may well be preferable to absurdity; yet absurdity is the ever-recurring note in Mailer's book. Why Mailer has written the two philosophical passages that I have quoted is hard to know—except that philosophical passages like these probably come to him in his sleep, and no matter what he really thinks about a given issue, he thinks that he thinks his usual thoughts. Or perhaps Mailer has shrunk at what his own book reveals, and is desperate to restore a sense of meaning and order to the universe, and has reached for his customary doctrine of existential risk and courage, the way someone else might turn to the comforts of theology.

The author of *An American Mystery* would rather write anything but mystery, as he tells us in the last of his references to Dreiser. In any case, these slight philosophical passages have had a bad effect, I think, on how *Oswald's Tale* has been interpreted. It is part of a book reviewer's craft to go looking for passages like these and to incorporate them into reviews (they make the reviewer's job so much simpler), which means that Mailer's bursts of philosophy, insignificant and misleading as they are, have been quoted and requoted in public discussions of the book, until they have assumed a programmatic importance that was never deserved.

But there is worse. Every single one of the ten thousand observed details that Mailer piles up regarding Oswald militates against the possibility that Oswald could have participated in a conspiracy to assassinate Kennedy. We perceive with exceptional clarity that Oswald is an extremely isolated man; gets along badly

with others; is not happy about subordinating himself; demands devotion from others, and does not offer it in return; is ideologically rudderless; cannot be relied on to stick to his commitments; and arouses a suspicion of insanity in at least some of the people he encounters. A less likely figure to be recruited into a conspiracy is hard to imagine. Mailer himself, in a lucid passage, says exactly that. *Oswald's Tale* can only be regarded as yet another, the umpteenth, dismissal of the conspiracy thesis, this time on the novel and novelistic grounds of a close study of the assassin's character. Yet Mailer insists on taking the thesis seriously.

This aspect of *Oswald's Tale* I find to be extremely irritating and frustrating. If the conspiracy is real, then the entire

book has been written from the wrong angle, which is not pleasant to consider, and if the conspiracy is a will-'o-the-wisp, why must we interrupt our reading about Oswald and his circle of acquaintances to go chasing it? The only interesting literary possibility that is raised by the conspiracy theory, it seems to me, would be to show once again how people in either the United States or the Soviet Union will do anything they can to avoid recognizing the irrationality of historical events, and will walk around pretending that Stalinist terror doesn't exist, or will construct ridiculous theories to explain why America's president was shot. But Mailer accepts the conspiracy theories on their own terms, not as symptoms of fear, and gravely considers them as actual possibilities, to be weighed and judged.

And so, having begun his book by invoking Theodore Dreiser, Mailer runs

steadily downhill until, by the middle of the second part, he is invoking the authors of books on the conspiracy theory and ostentatiously taking a stand of admirable independence among them, showing how Gerald Posner, the author of *Case Closed* (an anti-conspiracy book), has gotten some points wrong, and how Carl Oglesby, the author of *The Yankee and Cowboy War* (a pro-conspiracy book), has made some astute observations; and how even so, the conspiracy is only 25 percent likely. All of which could hardly be in greater contradiction with what Mailer has done in the rest of his book.

There are two Mailers, I would say: a man of the 1930s, attracted to the discipline of the naturalists and the realists (but knowing too much to be one of those writers himself); and a man of the 1960s, attracted to the fantasmagoria

of the mystics and screwballs (but too smart, except sometimes, to take his own fantasmagoria entirely seriously); and in *Oswald's Tale* he has tripped over this double identity, and has been unable to recognize that, in this book anyway, the Mailer of the '60s can only be an impediment when it comes to writing a book about what was one of the most important events of the '60s.

Are these points of philosophical incoherence fatal to the book? I don't think they are. For what is the purpose of a coherent metaphysical view of the universe in the work of a novelist? A consistent metaphysical view may be interesting in itself, if a writer can bring it off; but the main thing is to keep the writer alert, trained on his characters and their actions, attentive to the tiniest displays of human personality and therefore able to lend his book a feeling of urgency and life. And this the author of *Oswald's Tale* manages to do fairly consistently. He shows us Oswald taking his shot from the window at the Book Depository, and he imagines what a shock it must have been, once the deed was done, for Oswald to descend to Dealey Plaza and find himself plunged into reality, and the acuity of the author's imagination is no small thing:

He has been centered on his mission, balanced on his own heartbeat, living in a sense of dread and expectation so intense that it is beyond agitation. He possesses the kind of inner silence some can know when ultimates are coming to a moment of decision: Will he have the courage to fire his rifle and will he shoot well? Everything else, including the mounting tempo of excitement in the crowds outside the Book Depository, has no more presence for him than the murmur of a passer-by. Stationed within himself, he has now descended to those depths where one waits for final judgment. . . .

Stepping out in Dealey Plaza, therefore, must have been not unlike being hurled through a plate-glass window. Hundreds of people were milling around in disconnected hysteria. . . .

If the act of firing upon Kennedy had taken place as an event staged between himself and his vision of a great and thunderous stroke that would lift him at once from the mediocre to the immortal, this vision would not have included anyone else. Not even the victim.

Now, however, everybody around him is distraught. . . . It is a scene alien to him. He hurries down the street away from the Book Depository until, several blocks away, he catches a bus.

On it is Mrs. Bledsoe, the same landlady who had cheated him of \$2 in the first week he was back in Dallas after Mexico.



Mailer now quotes the transcript of the Warren Commission:

MRS. BLEDSOE: . . . Oswald got on. He looks like a maniac.

Of course! At the conclusion of volume one, Mailer interprets Marina's reaction:

She would say that the most humiliating thing that she ever experienced was on her walk from the police car to the police station after they told her that Lee had been arrested.

The police brought her out of the car, and she had to walk—she didn't know how far; it looked forever. Maybe it was some short distance; she does not recall. But, such shame—the most degrading, humiliating moment ever in her life. Just by going from car to building. Reporters were shouting, and it was nothing she could understand. She wished some earth would swallow her. She even believed that Lee had committed this crime, because she believed all American authorities. She blindly believed them. . . . Then she walked through a tunnel filled with reporters. Jammed. She couldn't believe it. This nightmare had herself in it. Leading role! She was playing a sleepwalker.

All of a sudden someone shouted to her in Russian: "Mrs. Oswald, did your husband kill America's President?" That Russian voice kind of woke her up. Fortunately,

She was feeling as if she could have drifted out of everything forever. She was abandoned—wife of an assassin who had killed the President.

Mailer's chapter on the mendacious Russian oaf who accuses Marina of being a prostitute, the portraits of the KGB men (oddly unaccompanied by parallel portraits of America's secret police), the picture of Oswald's mother—these are wonderfully deft. If only Mailer had been able to accept the inevitability of noninevitability, and to recognize that his book was bound to be a *Mystery* and not a *Tragedy*, Oswald's tale would have been genuinely grand. But, all right, there are more than enough elements of such an achievement to push you through from beginning to end, and to make you marvel at the writer's perspicacity, and at the events, and at the cold war, and at life in the Soviet Union, and at the strength of a literary tradition that wends its way, not without getting lost sometimes, from a world of naturalism to a world that looks at naturalism and wanly smiles.

PAUL BERMAN is a fellow of the New York Institute for the Humanities.

Editor, Book World  
The Washington Post  
1150 15 St., NW  
Washington, DC. 20071

4/30/95

On the very day the Post, belatedly, acknowledges editorially how harmful it was for "government processes" to "create and keep running" what was <sup>de</sup> ~~dis~~asterously wrong in Viet Nam, Book World sees to it that there is no ~~id~~ end to it with regard to the second greatest cause of national disenchantment and disillusionment, the JFK assassination.

To be sure of succeeding Book World chose to review Norman Mailer's prostitution of himself along with our history, a self-important-subject-matter ignoramus who, after reading what is really Mailer's Tale, does not ask himself how any longwinded ego-maniac could write 828 pages on the assumption, no more, that Oswald was the assassin.

Not only does Mailer offer ~~not~~ <sup>Joseph</sup> proof- and if Finder was at all familiar with Mailer's public record he would have known that Mailer always assumed Oswald's guilt without question - and from his own disgracefully self-descriptive bibliography has not read a single one of the books that with the official evidence only prove that Oswald was not the assassin and that this was known to all the official investigators.

I am quite prepared to face any challenge from you <sup>or</sup> from Finder on this. In fact, I invite it.

Ignorance and prejudice being what the Post requires for such reviews, Finder justifies the Post's confidence in this by praising Mailer for his use of "One of his major sources" that ~~in~~ <sup>in</sup> Finder's words is "the Warren Commission's investigation." The fact is that whether or not that part of this shameful book is Mailer's own work, which I doubt very much, the deliberateness with which he corrupts what he uses and the dishonesty of what he omits is, again Finder's words, "something only Mailer could have pulled off."

Unless Oswald was the assassin, and all the actual official evidence proves more than that he was not - that he could not have been - there is no point in the rerendered schmalz of his life in Minsk. There is nothing but meaningless detail ~~that~~ <sup>added</sup> for all his contact with the people of Minsk and the KBG there <sup>that</sup> Mailer adds to what ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> public. And even then he omits what utterly destroys the fiction he has been toying with for decades.

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Hailer's Tale, which is what emerged, was not even Hailer's idea. It was the deal arranged by the man for whom, Pulitzers or not, Hailer was the hired Pen, that scavenger of scavengers, that most successful of the commercializing ghouls, Larry Schiller.

Of whom Hailer himself says that he makes Munchausen seem like George Washington.

Why no question, did Schiller pay the KGB for what they got in Minsk and then cut the man Hailer in on the deal?

Such disgusting travesties, such deliberate corruption of the national mind and of our tragic history, are possible only because of the Orwellian practise of the major media and on the Post, particularly Book World, in suppressing all reference to the work that, based on the official evidence only, tells what truth can be told about the assassination without such morbid theorizing as the Hailers and their sycophantic Finders <sup>resort to</sup> find easy ~~reputation~~.

None of a disgrace to the Post is it that this sophomoric, ignorant, really stupid in the obvious questions it does not ask, misinformed as it refers to the public record, pretense of a scholarly review appears along after Publishers Weekly's review <sup>decimated</sup> described Hailer's sad Tale <sup>of April 25</sup> Exactly as it is and the New York Times (devoted more than 30 column inches to destroying Hailer's "doring," "presumptuous," "derivative," "solipsistic," "weary," "improbable," "portentous" book as "long-winded" and "ultimately superfluous!"

This whoring with our history disgraces us all. That Book World persists in it after all these years disgraces it and the Post. For shame!

*Harold Weisberg*

Harold Weisberg

Now, Ms. King, if you doubt my credentials I have published seven books on the JFK assassination and its investigations, with the eight <sup>now</sup> due- and with not one reviewed by the Post without a single letter or call from any one of the hundreds and hundreds of whom I wrote critically. Not any complaint of unfairness or of inaccuracy. And the Department of Justice itself, proof on request, told federal district court in my CA 75-226 that I knew more about the JFK assassination and its investigations than anyone working for the FBI. For 30 years I have been a source, credited and uncredited <sup>but</sup> never asking confidentiality of innumerable reporters, On the Post George <sup>d</sup> ~~l~~arner in particular. I think

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He will tell you that while we have disagreements I have never given him a bumsteer and that nothing he got from me and used was ever inaccurate. Moreover, I practise the right of the people to know as you resolutely refuse to. I give free and unbiased access to all those who write what I know I will not agree with to all the hundreds of thousands of pages of once-withheld official records I got from many FOIA lawsuits some of which the government stonewalled for a decade and more. They also have unsupervised access to our copier.

Despite the refusal of the Post to review a single one of my books. In fact, the reviewer wrote a favorable review of my first and it was killed.

I add a personal criticism: there are few issues more important to the integrity of our society ~~and~~ <sup>than</sup> the JFK assassination and its official investigations. And, you, personally, suppressed reviews of books based only on the official evidence that disprove the official mythology.

Is this how you meet your responsibilities in a society like ours? Or the Post does?  
When I met Mailer in  
On how you report to Post in 1973 at a gather of the assassination nuts I  
ING-  
1  
offered him access to all I have. That includes all the records I obtained and all my work on the Commission's unpublished documents as well as what it published. He said he'd think it over. He cites not only <sup>document</sup> in all 828 pages.

Sorry about my typing. I'm sorry it cannot be any better.

JW

# Book World

## Portrait Of a Lone Gunman

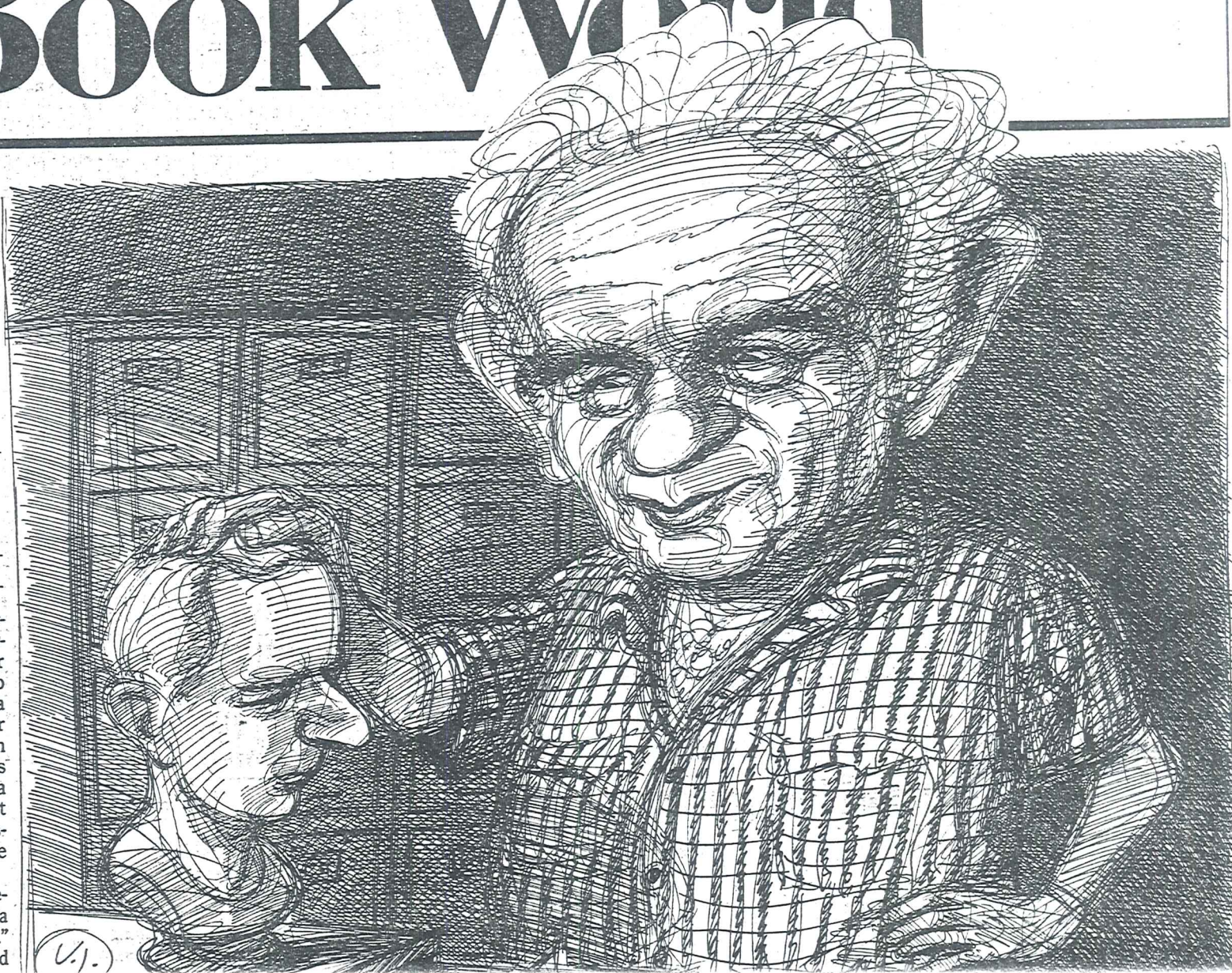
### OSWALD'S TALE An American Mystery

By Norman Mailer  
Random House. 791 pp. \$30

By Joseph FINDER

**I**N *OSWALD'S TALE: An American Mystery*, his finest achievement since *The Executioner's Song* (1979), Norman Mailer writes eloquently about our need to plumb the depths of the Kennedy assassination for a conspiracy. "It is virtually not assimilable to our reason," he contends, "that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a nonentity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd."

Indeed, Mailer admits that he set out to create this portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald with "a prejudice in favor of the conspiracy theorists." But although he became convinced that Oswald



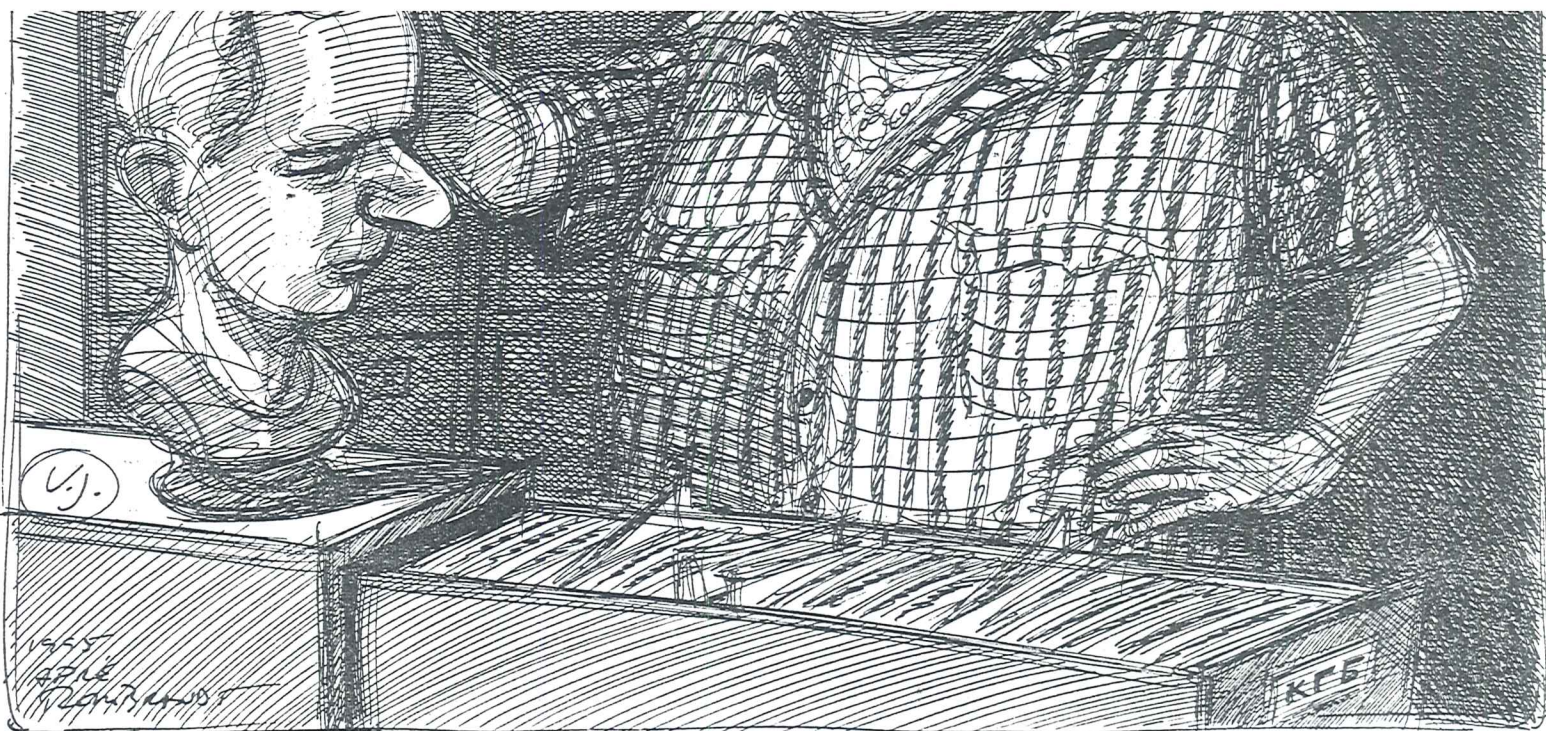
**I**N OSWALD'S TALE: An American Mystery, his finest achievement since *The Executioner's Song* (1979), Norman Mailer writes eloquently about our need to plumb the depths of the Kennedy assassination for a conspiracy. "It is virtually not assimilable to our reason," he contends, "that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a nonentity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd."

Indeed, Mailer admits that he set out to create this portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald with "a prejudice in favor of the conspiracy theorists." But although he became convinced that Oswald acted alone, he also quickly realized that "the difficulty with closing the case on Oswald is that every time one shuts the door, a crack opens in the wall." He had to settle for a more modest aim—to "set up a base camp on the slopes of such a mystery"—though, as he admits, "few who build a base camp have no ambitions to reach the summit."

The result is something only Mailer could have pulled off, a brilliant blend of scholarly obsession, journalistic shoe leather and grand intellect. *Oswald's Tale* is surprising, at times deliberately oblique and often spellbinding.

The first of the book's two "volumes" is a section of some 300 pages that describes the two and a half years that Oswald spent in Minsk after his 1959 defection to the Soviet Union. It is told almost entirely in the words of friends and acquaintances of Oswald and his Russian wife, Marina Prusakova, and rendered in indirect discourse, employing a comic, pidgin, Russian-accented English. Interleaved are extracts from KGB surveillance reports—highly suspicious of the young ex-Marine who came to stay, Russian intelligence kept Oswald under close scrutiny—and transcripts of the frequent marital spats between Lee and Marina.

These long-sealed transcripts, to which Mailer was granted exclusive access, allow him to give us an exhaustive depiction of the early days of the marriage between Lee and Marina. Their marriage was even worse than we sus-



"NORMAN MAILER CONTEMPLATING THE BUST OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD," AN ILLUSTRATION BY VICTOR JUHASZ FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

pected; Marina seems harsher and more goading, and Lee, whose low self-esteem alternated with towering megalomania, comes across as both more affecting and more put-upon.

Mailer and his associate, Lawrence Schiller, were also given the opportunity to interview 17 KGB officers, five of them in depth, and were able to confirm in illuminating detail what the KGB defector Yuri Nosenko told the CIA in 1964: that far from attempting to suborn Oswald, the Russian intelligence establishment was convinced he had been dispatched to penetrate them. Repeatedly they attempted to provoke him into revealing his true mission. They set out morsels—they had a friend and co-worker of Oswald's approach him and boast that his father was an important Soviet Air

Force general (and thus a perfect espionage target)—but Oswald didn't take the bait.

**V**OLUME TWO; "Oswald in America," covers Oswald's childhood and Marine career, touching on the question of whether, while stationed in Tokyo, Oswald sold information to the Soviets (he may have, Mailer concludes), and then moving on to Marina and Lee in Dallas and New Orleans, their contacts among the Russian émigré community and the days leading to the assassination.

Here Mailer relies far more on the work of others, most extensively Priscilla Johnson McMillan's masterly (and still unsurpassed) *Marina and Lee*, to which he acknowledges a major

debt. One of his major sources is even the Warren Commission's investigation, which—though he compares it to "a dead whale decomposing on a beach," so devoid is it of "the inquiring spark"—he considers a Comstock Lode of raw biographical material that helps limn Oswald's character. From such sources he assembles countless fragments into a narrative mosaic. This technique, which represents Mailer's attempt to make sense of Oswald's life, could have turned into a vast cut-and-paste job in the hands of a lesser writer.

If the Kennedy assassination is "our own largest American mystery," as Mailer insists, there is no field more trod upon. Yet Mailer manages to make his undertaking new by taking novelistic liberties that a traditional historian never would. One of the KGB officers who makes an appearance in the book—a character Mailer imagines as resembling the late William Paley, chairman of CBS—is actually an amalgam of several. Still, Mailer does not permit this license to detract from the fundamental gravitas of the historical enterprise. There is, he says, no made-up dialogue; all speculation is so labeled.

INSIDE

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Joseph Finder, author of the novels "The Moscow Club," "Extraordinary Powers" and the forthcoming "Prince of Darkness," writes often about intelligence and international affairs.

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# Oswald's Tale

Continued from page 1

And he puts his formidable novelistic talents to good use in bringing to life a colorful cast of characters, most centrally Oswald's mother, the dread Marguerite, whose "yoke of oppression" Lee was always struggling to escape. "The internal workings of her psyche," Mailer writes, "were always condemned to hard labor." Appropriately, *Oswald's Tale* begins and ends with Marguerite, "with her outrageous ego and her self-deceit, her bold loneliness and cold bones, those endless humiliations that burn like sores."

Mailer advances a number of theories about Oswald's role in the assassination, and if they are not new (what rumination on this subject is?) they are made with such tight, sinuous logic and supple prose that they cannot but persuade. On the nagging question of Jack Ruby—why, if it wasn't a conspiracy, did this small-time, Mafia-linked hood kill Oswald?—Mailer dazzles. He takes us on a speculative tour of Ruby's tortured psyche, through its twists and turns, and then presents us with several entirely plausible hypotheses that might explain a Mafia attempt to cover up a deed carried out by Oswald alone. For instance: What if either Carlos Marcello or Santo Trafficante, the mobsters who wanted Kennedy dead, had actually given the order—through a long series of cut-outs, as they'd have to—only to see the President actually gunned down, the assassin calling himself a patsy? Would not Oswald have to be eliminated?

Mailer Delights in the counterintuitive, in the sharp and sudden left turn, but at times his contentions seem less than



Lee Harvey Oswald with Marina Prusakova

warranted by the evidence. He maintains that Oswald's personal attitude toward Kennedy had little to do with his act, a position that ignores Marina's obsession with Kennedy (documented in McMillan's *Marina and Lee*), the photographs of him she kept around, and how often and longingly she spoke of him to Lee. It seems peculiar that the author of the 1960 essay "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," which so captured Kennedy's sexual electricity, denies the emotional centrality of the glamorous young president as a presence in Marina and Lee's lives—perhaps a contributing factor, impossible though it may be to weigh.

Oswald killed Kennedy, Mailer argues, in order to be taken seriously as a political actor. The assassination of the American president—"the largest opportunity he had ever been offered"—would vault him out of obscurity and mediocrity into greatness and immortality. *Oswald's Tale*, finally, is a long

meditation on identity (Mailer's great *idée fixe*) and on Oswald's need to achieve fame. It is here that Mailer is at his finest—imagining Oswald immediately following the assassination: "At rest in the vibrationless center of a dream," for "he had passed through the mightiest of the psychic barriers—he had killed the king." To Mailer, preoccupied so long with his own literary immortality and the dealings of literary regicide, Oswald's craving to secure a place in history must resonate deeply.

Oswald's life is a maddening warren of false leads, blind alleys, counterfeit identities. Everywhere he went he covered his tracks, confounded imagined enemies. "The lie," Mailer says, "has been Oswald's tool all his life." Here, then is the great irony of Lee Harvey Oswald: Like a squid leaving a cloud of ink in the water, Oswald created about himself a miasma of doubt and uncertainty, thereby feeding the conspiracy theories that even now would deny him credit for his great claim to celebrity.

If Norman Mailer has mellowed in recent years, as is so often observed, it has not meant a slackening in his vaunted powers of observation. The Mailer who in 1973, embarrassing to recall, proposed establishing a "People's CIA" and who in his famous 1976 essay on Watergate and the CIA, "A Harlot High and Low," gravely staked a claim as a Conspiracy Theorist, has of late begun to veer away from a fixation on conspiracy and paranoia, though without becoming less interesting. Calculated outrageousness has given way to cunning reason and subtlety of intellect. In *Oswald's Tale*, he may have failed to achieve the peak he set out to scale, but he has nevertheless achieved something still more ambitious and magnificent. America's largest mystery has found its greatest interpreter. ■

(From *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1995, Vol. 275, No. 5)

Books: Documents as Narrative

Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery, by Norman Mailer  
by John W. Aldridge

Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery  
by Norman Mailer.  
Random House, 848 pages, \$30.00.

In an amusingly poignant moment in *The Armies of the Night* (1968), Norman Mailer described a painful exchange he had with Robert Lowell during preparations for the 1967 march on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War. "You know, Norman," said Lowell in his fondest voice, "Elizabeth [Hardwick] and I really think you're the finest journalist in America." Mailer's response just managed to conceal the damage done to his gigantic yet oddly fragile self-esteem. "Well, Cal," said Mailer, using Lowell's nickname for the first time, "there are days when I think of myself as being the best writer in America"--meaning, of course, the best writer of fiction.

Mailer had for years worked hard to gain public credence for this idea of himself, which had obsessed him since the enormous success of his novel *The Naked and the Dead* (1948). That book set a standard he forever after struggled to meet. But the fact is that his particular form of journalism has consistently won him more popular and critical acclaim than any of his novels has been able to achieve. For *The Armies of the Night* he received both the National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize; a second Pulitzer was awarded for *The Executioner's Song* (1979), a huge study of the life and crimes of the murderer Gary Gilmore, which Mailer called "a true life novel." In a certain sense it is, but it is more precisely an example of creative imagination brilliantly at work on materials that in other hands would be treated with uninspired literalness.

In this new book, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*, Mailer again expresses his fascination with the criminal mind. This equally huge chronicle has a far more complex and enigmatic subject: Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged assassin of President John F. Kennedy, who was himself murdered before he could be brought to trial. But Mailer's method this time is journalistic rather than quasi-fictional, and it relies on the documentation of every fact that is already known or is here revealed for the first time about Oswald's life, from his childhood years to his death.

Whenever in the past forty years Mailer has published fiction, it has been received uncharitably, even with considerable rancor, as if it triggered the popular hostility to his public behavior--as if it were automatically seen as the most intimate personal expression of the wildly obnoxious self that he established long ago as his public persona. His most recent novel, *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), which had to do with dirty tricks perpetrated by the CIA, among other things, was greeted with a surly refusal in some quarters to judge it on its very considerable merits and with a nearly universal indignation over the fact that Mailer had the gall to conclude such a very long book (1,282 pages) with the statement "To be continued."

What made matters worse was that he often made use in his fiction of ideas that, when he expressed them in essays and interviews or acted them out in public, seemed distasteful or aberrational. In *The Time of Her Time* (1959), which first earned him his position at the top of the



militant-feminist hit list, the protagonist, Sergius O'Shaugnessy, brutally ravishes the female character both vaginally and anally in order to vanquish her hostility to him and drive her against her will to apocalyptic orgasm, a climax that is both physical and, for Mailer, a mystical attainment of harmonious selfhood, which in this case appears to mean a selfhood in full womanly subservience to the ruttish male.

An American Dream (1964), surely the most extensively pilloried of his novels, employed a Dostoevskian form of the murder mystery as a vehicle for his character's belief in the spiritually restorative effects of uxoricide--this after Mailer's near-fatal stabbing of his second wife, Adele, in 1960. In *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) he sought to demonstrate the cathartic possibilities of the scatological--how the use of obscenity, which the novel abundantly exhibits, might be a means of purging ourselves of the aggressions that were expressed in the obscenity of the Vietnam War. Again, the merits of these novels were ignored because their deeply offensive themes seemed to confirm the widespread impression that their author, in his depravity, was a malignant blight on the sanctity of American letters.

Yet as far back as 1959, in *Advertisements for Myself*, a collection of Mailer's essays, fiction, and ruminations on his life and career, something quite remarkable had begun to occur, something that was noted by few at the time but that was to bring about a gradual shift of opinion in Mailer's favor--not in the reputation of his novels but in the critical and popular response to his journalism.

*Advertisements*, parts of which were obviously written from the bottomless depths of his sense of literary failure, contained an agonizing delineation of his frustrations and personal mistakes and the collapse of the high hopes for fame that his large first success had engendered in him. His disappointment was so traumatic, he said, that it had been largely responsible for his bad public behavior.

Throughout the autobiographical sections the plaintive message was clear: Mailer not only deserved serious recognition for what he saw as the underrated novels he had written after *The Naked and the Dead*; far more crucially he needed it, to give him the renewed confidence that would nourish his enormous ambition to bring about, through his future work, a radical change in the consciousness of his time.

To many readers, *Advertisements* seemed conclusive proof of Mailer's descent into the failure he so bitterly lamented. But the response of those few who retained sympathy for him was exactly the opposite: they saw that in anatomizing his bleakest woes in the language of grief, he had, perhaps unwittingly, discovered a distinctive style, his true style, one very different from, and incomparably more authentic than, the writing in his earlier novels. It was a vigorous and free-wheeling idiom that blended the mean talk of the ghetto and the quick, edgy rhetoric of the psychopath into a prose instrument as keen and deadly as a switchblade. For those who saw this, the irony was deep and disturbing: in writing about the refusal of the public to recognize him as a major talent, Mailer had happened upon a form of personal confession that represented the first visible evidence of the large, perhaps even major, size of his talent.

Mailer also discovered in *Advertisements for Myself* the subject that came to be central to his later journalism: Norman Mailer himself, as beleaguered victim, antihero, and outlandish buffoon,

a character who became steadily more attractive, not so much because the things he described himself as saying and doing had ceased to seem deplorable but because a new note of humor and self-parodic mockery crept into the descriptions, giving them a quality of refreshing candor about his personal fears and insecurities. This stylistic frankness proved to be a powerfully effective antidote to the hostility of his enemies. In the book-length journalism he began to write in the late sixties and early seventies--*The Armies of the Night*, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), and *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971)--Mailer, calling himself simply "Mailer" or "the reporter" or "Aquarius" or "the Prisoner," became the true protagonist of the action he was describing. Separating the author from the story was no longer either necessary or possible; Mailer in his several personae made the story. It was, after all, his Pentagon march, his moon launch, his prison of sex; the final effect was extremely seductive.

The traits displayed by these personae had long been features of Mailer's public behavior. But when he had displayed them in that way, they had earned him only hostility. Now he had found a means of using them as literary material; in so doing he had turned his worst traits of character into almost lovable virtues. That, more than anything, more even than the excellent reporting to be found in them, earned his books of journalism the positive recognition he had so long sought.

But then, after having made what appeared to be a crucial breakthrough, Mailer abruptly abandoned his most charismatic character and went on to produce a book astonishingly devoid of any trace of his distinctive voice and presence. *The Executioner's Song* was instead composed so as to view Gary Gilmore and the people involved with him as characters creating their own novel out of what they were and did in real life. Mailer wisely allowed them to speak for themselves, in a variety of prose styles that emulated the manner in which they customarily spoke, with the result that they were individualized by the distinctive personalities of their idioms at the same time that they were given dramatic coherence by the tightly choreographed nature of the case itself, as it evolved from the murders Gilmore committed, through his trial and the efforts made to prevent his execution, to his death in Utah by firing squad. Mailer evidently believed that all he had to do was keep himself aloof from the story, the Joycean artist invisible, and depict actualities that were far more bizarre and compelling than anything he might have been able to imagine. He said in a 1980 interview, "What I had was gold, if I had enough sense not to gild it."

Mailer had good reason to believe he had gold. In Gilmore he seems to have recognized a character who embodied many of the preoccupations and ideas that had possessed him through much of his adult life: a capacity for violence, mysticism, belief in karma and reincarnation, the appeal of beautiful women, and the redemptive power of sex. His identification with Gilmore was so complete that he felt no need to tell the story in his own familiar voice. The drama and its meaning were already clear in the factual details. The story required no gilding.

Even before he decided to write the book, Mailer had access to an abundance of interviews and documents gathered by Lawrence Schiller, a film producer and literary entrepreneur who had worked closely with him on his previous books *Marilyn* (1973) and *The Faith of Graffiti* (1974). This helped him to develop a comprehensive knowledge of his subject without the arduous research that would otherwise have been required of him. Moreover, the brief nine-month period of the action, nearly all of it occurring in Utah, gave his story a classic unity of time and place

which helped to provide a form for the tragedy Mailer clearly thought the story was. The period was still fresh in the memories of the many people Schiller had interviewed; some had been questioned even before Gilmore was sentenced to die. Above all, the story contained no large and vexing mysteries or ambiguities. Gilmore's movements before, during, and after his crimes, and right up to the hours before his death, had been thoroughly documented, and much evidence was on record concerning his traits of character and states of mind throughout the action, because his various relatives, and in particular his girlfriend, Nicole Baker, had had ample opportunity to discover who the human being was behind the public mask of the murderer.

In writing *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*, Mailer had virtually none of these advantages, and the story's dramatic situation is more complicated and far less clearly defined. Of his books this one most closely resembles *The Executioner's Song*, at least in content, yet it is not in any sense "a true life novel." Rather it is, as I have said, the product of a huge labor of investigative journalism, in which the factual documentation itself comes to be the principal narrative method.

The countless interviews that form the major part of the documentation were recorded by Mailer, Schiller, and others, and are offered in the text quite frankly as interviews conducted with people who knew Lee Harvey and Marina Oswald at various times in their lives. Some remember Marina during her childhood and early youth in Leningrad. Others provide an account of Oswald's arrival in the Soviet Union in October of 1959, when he applied for but did not receive Soviet citizenship. Still others bear witness to the couple's courtship and marriage, and Oswald's agonized decision to return with Marina to this country in the spring of 1962.

The story culminates, of course, in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, in November of 1963. Further statements, drawn in part from Warren Commission testimony by Oswald's relatives, various friends who came to know the couple after they settled in Dallas, and others who had information about them at the time of the assassination and afterward, complete the book. One difficulty confronting Mailer was that much of this material is based on recollections of events that occurred thirty or forty years ago. Even when the interviews concern events of the post-assassination years, they lack the intimacy and freshness of the testimony in *The Executioner's Song*. Apparently no one, not even his wife, mother, or brother, knew Oswald well, and the book demonstrates that in most important respects he was impossible to know, if only because he seemed a stranger even to himself.

Another and far more serious difficulty was that Mailer clearly lacked sympathy for Oswald and could not identify with him as he had with Gilmore. Oswald was a powerful demonstration of the utter banality of the criminal mind, an infantile, wimpish sort of person who was motivated by impulsively formed and largely groundless ideas about himself and the nature of the world--the most ominous being that he was destined to perform some fearless act that would forever change the course of history and elevate him to greatness.

Oswald apparently wanted to become a Soviet citizen because he had had trouble finding a decent job in the United States, had had some painful experiences (which he brought entirely on himself) during his service in the Marine Corps, and had supposed that idyllic Communist propaganda accurately described the possibilities of life in the Soviet Union. He fantasized that once he was

there he would immediately be recognized as an invaluable asset to the Soviet government--just as, later, when he tried (and failed) to obtain a visa to go to Cuba, he imagined that he would be elevated to a high position there as an expert on Soviet and American affairs.

Oswald was, in short, an altogether unpromising candidate for the bleak notoriety that the historical moment thrust upon him, and he was surely the worst possible candidate for the kind of intricate and tragic role that Mailer had conferred on Gilmore. Mailer was left, therefore, with little alternative but to bring together all the available information concerning Oswald and to raise all the familiar unanswerable questions: Did Oswald act alone in killing Kennedy, or were other marksmen involved? Was he a hired hit man for the FBI, the CIA, or the Mafia? Did Jack Ruby shoot him because Ruby, too, was an agent of the Mafia, or was Ruby telling the truth when he said that he simply wanted to spare Jacqueline Kennedy the anguish of having to appear as a key witness at Oswald's trial?

Mailer conscientiously explores all these possibilities, and, of course, finds no provable answers. In the process he has amassed in one volume the greatest body of information on the Oswalds yet attempted. This book may be too sprawling and diffuse and altogether too enigmatic to be genuinely revelatory and suspenseful in the manner of *The Executioner's Song*. Yet it is a constantly fascinating and clearly important document that, having presented its case in full, allows readers to infer what they can and will from the assembled facts. That is the primary mission of journalism at its best, and Mailer performs it with his customary skill and thoroughness, and a quite uncharacteristic determination to keep himself out of the story.

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John W. Aldridge is the author of several books of criticism, including *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction* (1992) and *Classics and Contemporaries* (1992). Aldridge is at work on a book about contemporary American novelists.

"Documents as Narrative"

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atoswald

The PRINCIPAL WORKS of NORMAN MAILER

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The Naked and the Dead (novel) 1948  
Barbary Shore (novel) 1951  
The Deer Park (novel) 1955  
The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster (ess  
Advertisements for Myself (short stories, verse, nonfiction,  
novel) 1959  
Deaths for the Ladies (and Other Disasters) (poetry) 1962  
The Presidential Papers (essays) 1963  
An American Dream (novel) 1965  
Cannibals and Christians (essays) 1966  
The Deer Park: A Play (drama) 1967  
The Short Fiction of Norman Mailer (short stories) 1967  
Why Are We In Vietnam? (novel) 1967  
The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as Hi  
novel) 1968  
Miami and the Siege of Chicago: An Informal History of the R  
Democratic Conventions of 1968 (nonfiction novel) 1968  
Of a Fire on the Moon (nonfiction novel) 1970; also publishe  
the Moon, 1970  
Maidstone: A Mystery (screenplay) 1970  
The Prisoner of Sex (nonfiction) 1971  
Marilyn: A Biography (nonfiction) 1973; revised edition, 197  
Genius and Lust: A Journey through the Major Writings of Hen  
(criticism) 1976  
The Executioner's Song (nonfiction novel) 1979

Of Women and Their Elegance (fictional autobiography) 1980

The Executioner's Song (screenplay) 1982

Pieces and Pontifications (essays and interviews) 1982

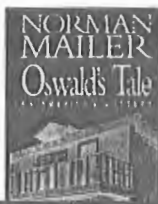
Ancient Evenings (novel) 1983

Tough Guys Don't Dance (novel) 1984

Tough Guys Don't Dance (screenplay) 1987

Harlot's Ghost (novel) 1991

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## BOOKS

Will Blythe

# The Lone Novelist Theory

**A** QUIET MAN SITS ALONE in a room, writing, dreaming. Ratty T-shirt, khaki pants. No job, nothing to dress for. He is host to secret reveries of dominion and revolution, dreams that his life outside the little room ridicules with its brutal distance from his grand imaginings. In his own shy, dissembling way, he wants to inscribe his name on history. He is engaged in a great secret work, even if no one in this jangling cash register of a culture cares. His wife appears in the doorway, baby on her hip, asking him to go buy some milk. He waves her away without a word. Milk! No time for milk! Ah, he is pathetic. A loser. He knows. It is not milk that sustains a man, it is his ability to force his dreams upon the world. He sees himself in the third person as that great television set of the world will one day see him. He has greatness in him, that will be clear.

Is he a novelist or an assassin? From what we know so far, who could say? And that may suggest the reason some of our best-known writers—Don DeLillo, James Ellroy, and now Norman Mailer—betray a remarkable affinity for Lee Harvey Oswald, the protagonist of the previous scenario. How oddly familiar it must be to slip into his vainglorious head. In its daily particulars, its marginality, its mixture of grandiosity and despair, his life could be theirs. Maybe the main difference between Oswald and most writers is simply that Oswald was a better shot.

Mailer's interest in Oswald's role in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, like most Americans', has been abiding, if positively squinty-eyed with suspicion. Back in 1966, exasperated with the Warren Commission's findings, he suggested, with a touching, surely anachronistic faith in the wisdom of literary critics, that a second commission be formed, with Edmund Wilson at its head, or with Dwight MacDonald as a one-man inquisition. Just three years ago, in a review of Oliver Stone's *JFK*, he continued to shell the Washington establishment for its devotion to the lone gunman theory, an adherence he regards as born out of political expediency. That he's decided to add his voice to the fray once again, this time with a hefty nonfiction docudrama called *Oswald's Tale* (Random House), is hardly surprising. The shock arrives in encountering the narrative's almost professorial deference, its structural fatigue, its desultory air of anticlimax. This is not the twinkle-eyed Mailer we've come to expect (and love), sparking off hypotheses with all the urban panache of a

tailpipe dragging on asphalt. Nor is this a frontal assault on the solution to America's most uneasy riddle. This, instead, is Mailer setting up a nearly eight-hundred-page "base camp on the slopes of the great mystery." He's composed a modest, albeit insightful, character study that implies, rather cautiously, that Oswald was indeed capable of acting alone. The problem is, we've been stuck in this particular base camp for years—the food stinks, the company's gotten old, and a long shadow is coming down the mountain. Might as well find another peak to climb if we're not going to the top.

This is not to say that Mailer has swallowed Gerald

Posner's "the matter is settled" brief, *Case Closed*, on behalf of Oswald as the lone gunman. Only that what Mailer now knows about Oswald's character, and about the international spook community, nudges him toward a somewhat more middle-of-the-road Oswald, not so much a dupe of intelligence services as an object of their curiosity. That's fair enough, but you begin



A happy family? Marina and Lee in Moscow.

to wonder if all the research Mailer did on the putative WASP establishment and its most secure redoubt, the CIA, in order to write *Harlot's Ghost* has resulted in his understanding its views all too well. Study the enemy long enough and you start to think like him.

No doubt the book initially promised a good deal more when Mailer's colleague Lawrence Schiller gained access to Byelorussian KGB files on Oswald and the two men went to Russia for six months to peruse the archives and interview agents and acquaintances of Oswald and his Russian-born wife, Marina. What a thrilling cache this must have originally seemed, likely, no doubt, to beam an overpowering searchlight on the issue of whether Oswald was connected to any intelligence service, especially the KGB. In actuality, the files cast all the crestfallen glare of a single lightbulb hanging over an interrogator's table. You can study Oswald's character, harshly illuminated at close range (though even in that proximity, he is impossible to fathom totally), but almost everything else remains in blackness.

What the files and interviews do make clear is that no

## B O O K S

one can quite figure what Oswald is up to when he defects in Moscow at the end of 1959. He is the man who would be a revolutionary if he could just find the revolution that will have him. Touchingly, the KGB worries over the calculating Oswald as if he were a weekend houseguest; it's determined to make a good socialist impression on this strange refugee from capitalism. It sets him up in Minsk with a nice job in a radio factory and a fine apartment overlooking the Svisloch River. Being a busy worker bee isn't exactly what Oswald has in mind, though. He seems to crave the limelight, perhaps a role advising the government. By now, he thinks of himself as an expert in the socialist and capitalist systems.

As an American defector in cold-war Russia, he possesses the exotic allure of a male exchange student at a girls' school. He meets Marina Prusakova at a trade-union dance in March of 1961. She wears a red dress and white slippers. She takes him home to her aunt and uncle's but will not sleep with him. Oswald is enraptured. Soon, they are married.

The KGB continues to monitor the

newlyweds, eavesdropping on their fights and even their lovemaking. The transcripts disrobe not a CIA agent but a young, overburdened couple slogging through matrimonial disillusionment. At times, Mailer comes close to suggesting that marriage is the crucible that forges an assassin, that makes a mama's boy into a surly, henpecked husband looking for recognition from the world at large.

WIFE: (cries) *Why did I get married?*

LHO: Well, what am I supposed to do? Is it my fault you have a lot of work? I mean, you don't ever cook, but other women cook. And I don't say anything about it. I don't yell. You never do anything and you don't want to do the wash. What do you do? The only thing you ever talk about is how tired you are at work.

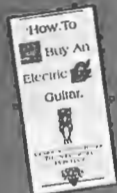
As intriguing as this new Russian material is, it doesn't tell us much about Oswald's character that we didn't already know. It's as if we've been peeking into a loved-one's diary, only to discover no secrets: a relief, but dull in the way the expected can be. (You want your love capable of surprise.)

It's too bad, really, because judging from the book's opening, *Oswald's Tale* might have become one of the author's greatest books, if not the great American novel long promised, even better—more brazenly!—the great Russian novel! In those early sections about Marina Oswald's family, Mailer seems possessed by the shade of Tolstoy, ranging throughout fifty years of Russian history with the same command of the local idiom he displayed in regard to the Utah of *The Executioner's Song*. "It was a good family," he writes of the Prusakovas, "and they were kindhearted, and approximately everybody was equal."

The philosophical crux of Mailer's investigation is this: Kennedy's death is more tolerable "if we can perceive his killer as tragic rather than absurd." The irony is that though we may know more about Lee Harvey Oswald than he ever knew about himself, we still don't know enough to decide whether Oswald had the makings of a king, or whether he was a sad, invisible man trying to shoot himself into a new universe that briefly intersected with his on November 22, 1963. ■

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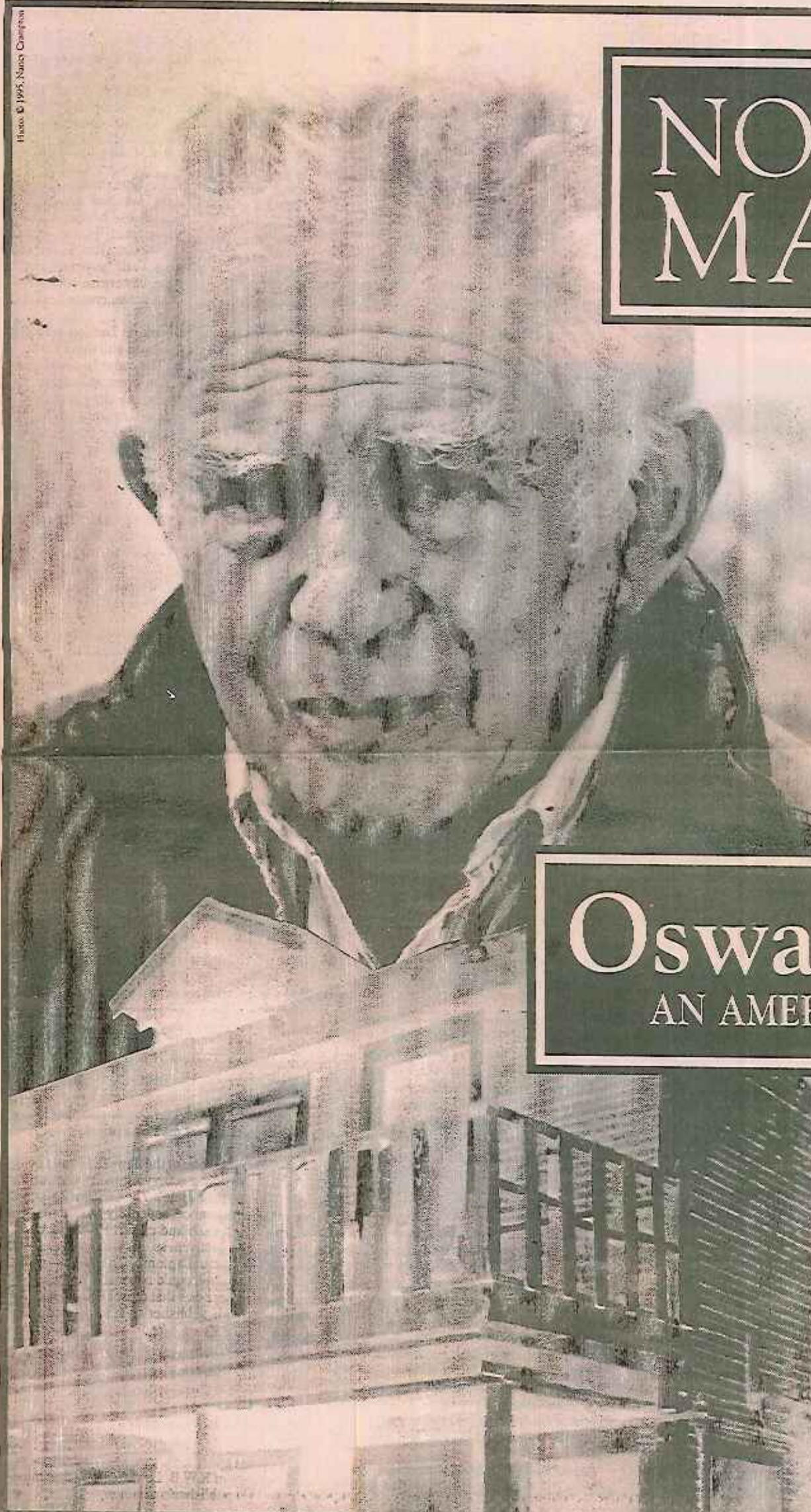
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DARLING**  
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**MIKE LUPICA**  
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# NORMAN MAILER

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Mailer asks the question no one else has: Who was Oswald? And in his brilliant answer—including details drawn from his exclusive access to KGB documents—he reveals the truth at the heart of America's greatest tragedy.

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# The Assassin's Song

**OSWALD'S TALE: An American Mystery**, by Norman Mailer. Random House, 791 pp., \$30.

BY LARS-ERIK NELSON

**O**N THE NIGHT before he was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald, President John F. Kennedy and his wife, Jackie, spent the night in a Fort Worth, Texas, hotel room decorated with art works assembled by a local matron, Mrs. J. Lee Johnson III.

"Mrs. J. Lee Johnson III!" exclaims Norman Mailer. "One has to observe that her married name bears the first initial of J. Edgar Hoover, has Lee in the middle, and ends with the last name of the President who will succeed Jack Kennedy. . . . Perhaps the cosmos likes to strew coincidences around the rim of the funnel into which large events are converging."

Perhaps, too, Norman Mailer is a little dippy. An analyst who can seize upon "coincidences" like Mrs. J. Lee Johnson III (and her maiden name was Carter!) is probably not to be trusted to handle evidence of any sort. But Mailer remains a gifted storyteller, and the Kennedy assassination remains a compelling enough drama to survive even this huge, rambling, disorderly turtle of a book.

"Oswald's Tale" is Mailer's exhaustive quest for larger meaning in the Kennedy assassination, an ef-

fort to find great tragedy rather than the "absurdity" that our Prince Valiant was senselessly murdered by a "snarling little wife-abuser" like Oswald. "If a figure as large as Kennedy is cheated abruptly of his life," Mailer writes, "we feel better, inexplicably better, if his killer is also not without size. . . . Tragedy is vastly preferable to absurdity."

Mailer's search opens in Minsk, where Oswald lived after defecting to the Soviet Union in 1959, and where he met and married Marina. With the collapse of the Soviet state, the KGB's surveillance records fell into the hands of the new republic of Belarus, which apparently offered them to Mailer. But the surveillance transcripts proved disappointing. Oswald got up, went to work, fought with his wife, went to bed, had sex, got up, washed, didn't brush his teeth, went to work. Mailer decided to flesh out the unilluminating KGB records with detailed interviews with Marina's surviving relatives and Oswald's friends and co-workers.

The result is an intriguing, colorful glimpse of daily life inside the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, written — deliberately — in a stilted, Russified style that sounds as if it came from the Tass English service rather than a gifted American novelist. Women are quoted as saying their husbands never "insulted" them; the Smirnitsky dictionary translates "oskorbat" as "insult" instead of the more accurate "abuse" and Mailer sticks with stiff, dictionary Russian. We learn all about Oswald's Minsk friends and in-laws — and all of their sisters and their cousins and their uncles and their aunts. None of this has anything to

PLEASE TURN THE PAGE



Detroit Free Press / AP

Lee Harvey Oswald in April, 1963

Lars-Erik Nelson, a Washington columnist for this newspaper, was a foreign correspondent in Moscow in the 1960s.

# The Once and Future Queen

**JACKIE UNDER MY SKIN: Interpreting an Icon**, by Wayne Koestenbaum. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 291 pp., \$21.

BY HENRY ALFORD

**I**T IS POSSIBLE that we will never know with certainty what influence, if any, Jacqueline Kennedy held over her husband's presidential administration. However, one thing about the woman we have come to know as Jackie O. is clear: She continues, as an icon, to hold sway in the public imagination with an intensity and vigor not accorded some presidents, let alone other former first ladies. Certain images are lodged in our consciousness. Click: a slightly loopy tastemaker and sophisticate, breathily escorting the nation on a televised tour of the White House. Click: a witness to unbearable tragedy, crawling away in a pink suit. Click: a too rich and too thin socialite, caught in the act of nude suntanning by an aggressive paparazzo.

In his new book, "Jackie Under My Skin," Wayne Koestenbaum offers a cultural critique of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis as an icon. Dividing his study up into 40 short chapters, Koestenbaum, an associate professor of English at Yale and author of the fascinating "The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire," offers 40 mini-treatises on topics ranging from "Jackie and Transportation" to "Jackie and Repetition," from "Jackie's Sunglasses and Scarf" to "Jackie and Synesthesia." By turns comic and elegant, respectful and blasphemous, the book serves to broaden our concept of "the sphinx who helped us to stage manage chaos."

Koestenbaum's approach is largely semiotic: He is interested in systems of meaning and in the symbolic import of iconography and outward appearance. At its best, this approach allows the author to take a seemingly insignificant detail and show how it is emblematic of something much larger. In "Jackie and Apocalypse," for example, Koestenbaum deftly analyzes two random utterances — the first lady asking a White House usher, "Mr. West, will you take me to the bomb shelter?" and one of Aristotle Onassis' servants saying that Mrs. Onassis "looked like the kind of lady who would keep a

Henry Alford is the author of "Municipal Bondage."

manicure appointment on the morning of Armageddon" — to demonstrate how his subject's highly practical and composed reaction to potential danger helped ease the nation's anxieties about the specter of annihilation.

Koestenbaum concludes aptly: "Jackie's usefulness, as icon, is that she confuses the dogmatic opposition between inessentials and essentials; she summed up apocalypse's deferral (and its nearness), because she seemed always to keep up appearances, because she survived JFK's murder and because she seemed the opposite of politics."

**O**N A FEW occasions, however, Koestenbaum's approach is so speculative as to strain plausibility and logic. "Her hairdos remind me of the bubbletop over the presidential convertible — the bubbletop that should have been lowered in Dallas," he writes at one point. In another passage, after mentioning that an American astronaut's response to the news of Mrs. Kennedy's marriage to Aristotle Onassis was "Oh my!," he suggests that this is the "classic" reaction to his subject, and then, for reasons not entirely clear, he provides the reverse of that statement — "My O." He concludes, "Saying 'Oh my!' in response to Jackie's presence, I claim her: I say 'Her O is mine.'"

Koestenbaum is on steadier ground in those chapters in which he compares his subject with other women. In "Jackie Versus Liz," he cleverly uses movie magazine headlines that pitted Jacqueline Kennedy against Elizabeth Taylor — "Jackie Will Marry! Liz Will Divorce!" — to illustrate the dynamic of the tasteful, decorous princess vs. the trashy, swinging vixen. He shows how, perversely, both women's experience with collapse and loss — their own or that of their men — fanned the flames of their stardom.

In another chapter, the author compares his subject with Maria Callas, Mrs. Kennedy's rival for the love of Aristotle Onassis. To do so, Koestenbaum asserts, is to make Jackie seem less vulnerable (because she "stole" Ari) if less theatrical and less demonstrative. Callas once told a reporter, "All I know about Mrs. Onassis is what I have read about her in the papers." Koestenbaum notes that "Jack-



AP Photo

Jackie (and Jack) Kennedy in 1960

ie had the power to make even Maria Callas seem like an ordinary person."

Koestenbaum is an obsessive's obsessive: His book is a fever-dream of fixation and impassioned insight. Little or nothing escapes his gaze. If, at times, his assertions seem the product of an overactive imagination, they are never less than compelling. We are happy to revel in the inner workings of Koestenbaum's obsession because he is, as our tour guide, both fearless and thorough. When, at the conclusion of the tour, he asks, "Is the Jackie moment over?," we all know the answer: Clearly not. ■

## OSWALD

do with the Kennedy assassination, but it is interesting sociology.

Mailer spends a good deal of time with one source who regales us with tales of Marina's alleged sexual promiscuity (she was thought by some to be a hooker from Leningrad). But then, after recounting the juicy details, the author decides the fellow is an alcoholic and a liar. Mailer also repeatedly and gratuitously raises the possibility that Oswald was homosexual. A Marine with whom Oswald served is found dead on guard duty one night with a shotgun at his side. Mailer speculates that Oswald killed him in the course of a homosexual act. The evidence for this? Zero.

One of the lingering mysteries of the Oswald case is how he managed to get his passport back so that he could return home. Oswald defected to the Soviet Union in October, 1959, went to the American Embassy and declared that he wanted to "dissolve" his citizenship. In those years, U.S. embassies were routinely stripping Americans of their citizenship — and seizing their passports — for such trivial offenses as voting in local elections. The only way to regain citizenship was by an act of Congress. Yet Oswald was never deprived of citizenship, recovered his passport and even got the U.S. embassy to finance his passage home with a loan.

Mailer speculates, as have others, on the possibility that Oswald was some kind of agent, but he can find no evidence that this is true. The U.S. embassy and the Soviet authorities both seemed to have regarded him as a jerk and a nuisance.

The second half of the book, Oswald's life in the U.S., is largely a scissors-and-paste job that relies heavily on earlier studies: Priscilla McMillan Johnson's 1977 "Marina

and Lee"; Edward Jay Epstein's "Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald"; Gerald Posner's "Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK," and the voluminous official transcripts of the Warren Commission and the House Select Committee on Assassinations.

Mailer recounts that Oswald's horrifyingly awful mother, Marguerite, bathed him until he was 11 years old. In the Marine Corps he defended Communist ideology. He regarded himself as a superior, unappreciated intellect, and Mailer draws an interesting parallel with Adolf Hitler's self-pitying maudlinings in "Mein Kampf." As a self-appointed activist for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, Oswald was a skilled Marxist-style debater, even though his writings are semi-literate. As a member of the Russian emigré community in Texas, he came into contact with exiles who had uncertain ties to the CIA, but there is no thread to link him directly to the agency or to suggest, as Marguerite insisted, that he was secretly a U.S. agent.

Most bizarre of all, he had no special dislike for President Kennedy. The assassination, at bottom, appears to have been an act of mindless violence for no apparent purpose — not revolution, not revenge, nothing. Oswald was just a little jerk with an ego and a rifle. For all his speculations, Mailer — to his credit, in these days of plot-mongering — does not pretend to find hidden conspiracies and secret intrigues. In the end, Mailer does not discover the great tragedy he was looking for, but a tragedy nonetheless — that this "absurdity," this twerp Oswald could have inflicted such great sorrow on this country. ■

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this material. Mississippi's Gothic weather cooperates throughout, with stupefying heat, portentous thunderstorms, even a hurricane threat to underline dramatic moments, while colorful thumbnail portraits extend even to Benny Bennett, of the Hinds County DA's office, whose sole role in the story is to drive Myrlie Evers to the courthouse. But though this may be bedside reading it is never comfortable, as it evokes all of the dangers and humiliations of life under segregation, and of the landmark events that changed it forever.

A reader without a long memory would need a guide into the tangled thicket of Charles M. Payne's "I've Got the Light of Freedom," an often repetitive, disorganized study of "The Movement" from its origins to the present. But if this is not an easy narrative, it is a provocative, wide-ranging rumination on the nature, and nurturing, of leadership itself. Payne deliberately neglects the dramatic high points. He begins with the stories of the ordinary men and women of extraordinary courage who risked their lives by chipping away at southern racism in their own communities years before the big demonstrations and national publicity.

Payne is less interested in competing national organizations, whose acronyms would only confuse a younger generation — NAACP, SCLC, SNCC, CORE — than in the unsung people on the ground. With due respect to such idols as Martin Luther King Jr., the author's own three heroes are Ella Baker and Sep-

tima Clark, native southerners who made a lifework of encouraging local leaders and community networks, and the educated northerner Robert Moses, of SNCC, whose self-effacing style of organizing was dedicated to teaching people to help themselves, to remain at work after the tumult died down and the media moved on.

Just as Maryanne Vollers has enough historical insight to deserve a place in the study, Charles Payne's stories of local wit and grit have style enough to be enjoyed in the bedroom. Both could have ended their books on a conventional note of triumph, with a sneering assassin brought to justice, and an integrated Mississippi today offering more political opportunity to its African-American residents than almost any other state. But neither will let the reader off lightly. Beckwith's conviction may be seen, Vollers hints, as a symbolic front hiding the poverty, crime and misery which still plague the Delta.

And just as Vollers' Charles Evers today is the classic, self-serving Mississippi politician of yore in a black skin, Payne concludes that the early promise of interracial community and bottom-up leadership in the civil-rights movement was soon lost in arrogance, racial divisiveness and corruption once it began to succeed. Mississippi is a far better place than it was, but not what many of its finest spirits had hoped it might be. Perhaps Myrlie Evers-Williams, as newly elected head of the NAACP, can help move it toward the future that she and her husband once dreamed of. ■

## THE SMALL PRESS

## History in Performance

**LAST DANCE AT THE HOTEL KEMPINSKI: Creating a Life in the Shadow of History**, by Robin Hirsch. University Press of New England, 300 pp., \$24.95.

BY ELIZABETH GAFFNEY

FROM EXODUS to the founding of Israel, Jewish history provides the paradigm for self-examination in Robin Hirsch's memoir.

The author's experiences as the son of German-Jewish refugees in London during World War II, as an Oxford scholar, a Fulbright fellow, a wandering actor and a father have been enormously rich. And though his relationship to Judaism is uneasy, Hirsch acknowledges the depth to which he is imbued in his inherited Jewish culture: history, achievement, ritual, family and suffering are themes from which he cannot escape, despite having been a thoroughgoing hippie in the '60s with subsequent forays into yoga and Rolfing.

The prologue, which recounts Hirsch's 1988 decision, made with his wife, to have their first son circumcised, is delightful — a judicious admixture of seriousness and skeptical irony. Hirsch addresses the dark, barbaric underbelly of the otherwise joyful ritual, yet the descriptions of foreskin clipping and the "bloody stump" manage to heighten rather than squelch the predominant mood of celebration.

From this scene, we are catapulted back into Hirsch's own childhood. The book is a collection of vignettes that were originally conceived as performance pieces.

At its strongest, Hirsch's voice retains a spoken quality, powerfully conveying mood, meaning and drama. But some passages are clearly stage writing and falter without the actor's interpretation and expression. Hirsch recalls the day that Field Marshal Montgomery inspected his school's Combined Cadet Force and one can imagine the humor in seeing the actor-play a platoon leader; but on the page, the barked orders seem contrived and grow wearisome before the four-page chapter is out.

Hirsch pokes fun at his parents' German-accented English by repeating a recurrent exchange between him and his father. It takes place, during childhood, through

the closed door of his father's office and, after Hirsch has left home, over transcontinental telephone lines: "'Hullo?' 'Hello, Daddy.' 'Hullo?' 'Hello, Daddy, it's Robin.' 'Who?' 'Robin.' 'Who?' 'Your son, Robin.' 'Ach, RRRawbeen.' 'Is Mummy home?' 'Kathe,' he yelled, 'dein Sohn ist am Apparat.'" Even for a reader who understands the smattering of German words, the dialogue is unnecessarily difficult to follow in places.

The frequent jokes, such as an elderly aunt's reference to the installation of foam-insulation as a "blow job," reveal the author's surprising lack of awareness that in standup, delivery is everything.

Among the many captivating characters that populate Hirsch's memoir is Jochem, his mother's first husband, whose presence defines the central and most successful part of the book, the eponymous "Man Who Danced With Marlene Dietrich." According to family legend, Jochem danced with the star at a ball in the '20s and when, a score of years later, he noticed she was playing at a Vegas hotel and sent flowers, she tracked him down — the implication being that she had pined for him all those years.

Hirsch meets Jochem only three times, but the encounters resonate throughout the book and are as moving as anything in it. At the last meeting, in Los Angeles, the 73-year-old Jochem picks up Hirsch and his then-wife, Naomi, for dinner: "At seven a battered old Plymouth pulled up outside the hotel. It was drizzling. The driver's door opened and a man in a hat and raincoat got out. He turned back, reached in and pulled out an umbrella. It was clearly Jochem and the umbrella was clearly not for him but in order to escort us down to the car." I kept hoping for a revelation that the real father was Jochem, not the touchy disciplinarian who raised Hirsch, but as the essential constraint of autobiography is fact, I was disappointed.

In this energetic but uneven volume, fragments are assembled, as in a mosaic, to produce a larger, more complex image. But a mosaic's wonder is that the elegance of its composition draws so much from simple elements; to this book's detriment, its structure often seems forced upon the organically conceived monologues, and the individual pieces outshine the whole. ■



Photo by Charles McKenna

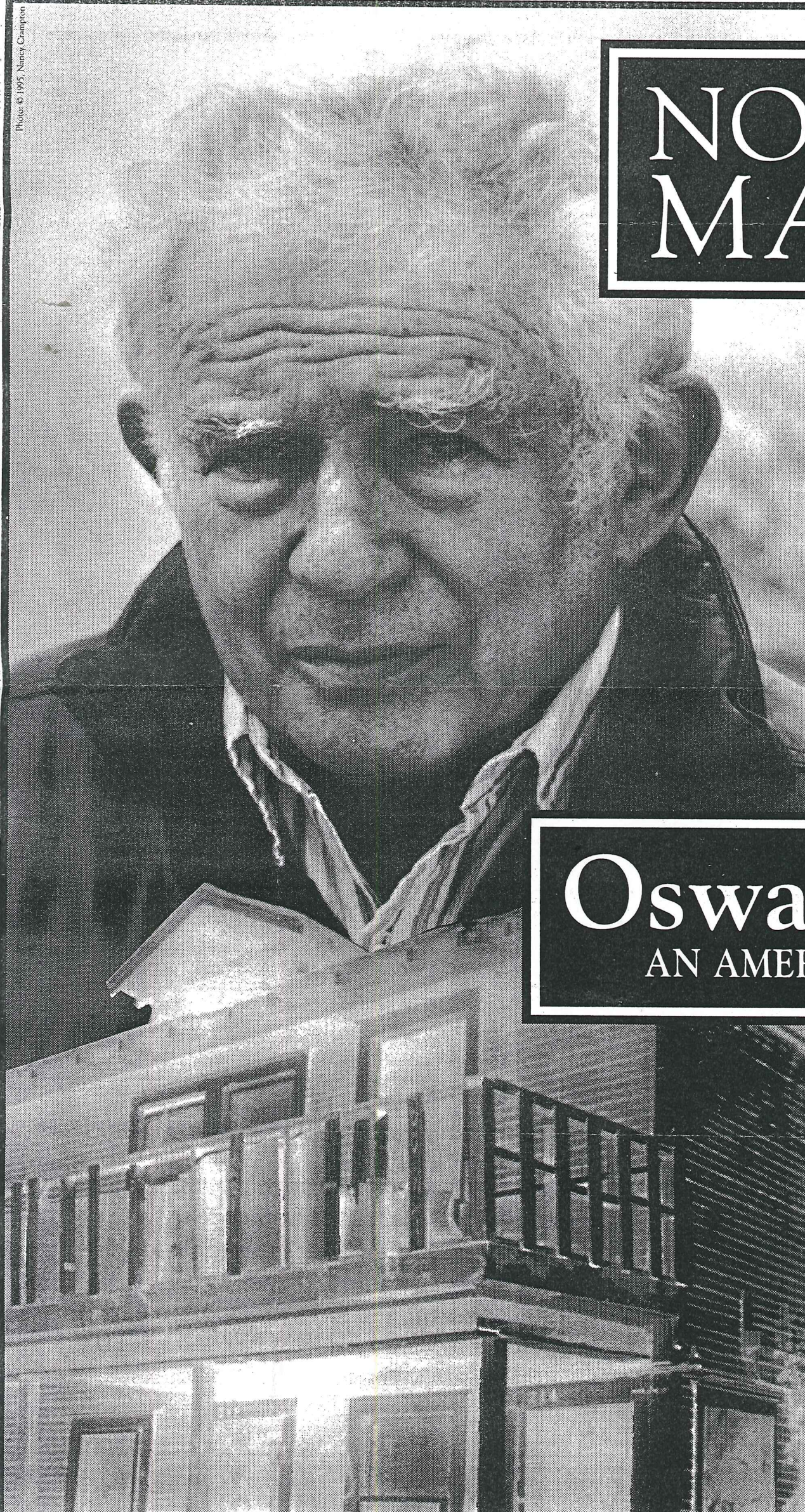
Robin Hirsch

**Achievement, ritual, family and suffering are themes from which the author cannot escape.**

Elizabeth Gaffney is managing editor of *The Paris Review*.

Tues 5/1/98

Photo © 1995 Nancy Chompton



# NORMAN MAILER

**BEYOND MYTH.  
BEYOND MURDER.**

**BEYOND ANYTHING  
YOU HAVE EVER READ.**

In the same masterful vein as his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Executioner's Song*, Norman Mailer now reveals the elusive figure who has gripped the nation's imagination for over 32 years. Here is Lee Harvey Oswald, the man.

Mailer asks the question no one else has: **Who was Oswald?** And in his brilliant answer—including details drawn from his exclusive access to KGB documents—he reveals the truth at the heart of America's greatest tragedy.

## Oswald's Tale AN AMERICAN MYSTERY

*Advance praise for Oswald's Tale*

**"Constantly fascinating  
and clearly important.  
Journalism at its best."**  
— *The Atlantic Monthly*

**"Impressively textured....  
Judicious, painstaking,  
and imaginative....  
Mailer enters his subject's  
spiritual world."**  
— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

**"Magnificent."**  
— *Booklist*

A Main Selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club  
Also available as a Random House AudioBook

RANDOM HOUSE

5-1-95

DEAR HAROLD,

AFTER I MAILED YOU MAILER'S BOOK REVIEW, I CAME ACROSS THIS INTERESTING ARTICLE FOR YOUR COLLECTION.

Hi Lil!

SHALOM, Joe

LEE HARVEY'S OLDEST

# JUNE OSWALD

As America's obsession with her father goes on, a daughter tries to set the record straight.

By Steve Salerno

**M**ORE THAN 30 YEARS AFTER the Kennedy assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald is a name that will not go away. One of the latest authors to wade into the conspiracy waters is Norman Mailer, whose book "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery" will be published next month. The assassination has also been a constant in the life of June Oswald Porter, the 33-year-old daughter of Lee Harvey Oswald. In her early years, grocery shopping with her mother, Marina, and sister, Rachel, took place amid stares and finger-pointing; hushed conversations ignited around them like flash fires as they walked the supermarket aisles. Because Marina Oswald realized that she and her children could become the focus of attention at any time, she made sure June and Rachel were always neatly dressed — no matter how small the chore, and despite the fact that the family was often financially strapped. "She never knew when we'd run into someone, and she didn't want us to look like poor white trash," June says simply.

Upon entering public school, June took the surname of her stepfather, Kenneth Porter, who married Marina in 1965. But anonymity exacted a curious price of its own, as June faced myriad graceless references to her father, mother and family. Even an intended compliment could hold hidden barbs — as when a male co-worker remarked on June's resemblance to "a young Marina Oswald," then immediately apologized, saying he "didn't mean to insult her" by invoking the infamous name.

Nonetheless, during several interviews over the past

*Steve Salerno writes frequently on political and social issues.*

year, she reports being content. And she recalls her childhood as a "pretty happy" time, thanks in large part to her stepfather. June is quieter about her own marriage, which ended in 1992. She remains protective of her privacy, distancing herself and her sons, ages 6 and 3, from the oddball clique of assassination cultists who have dogged the Oswald women — Marina, now 53, June, and Rachel, 31 — ever since the events of Nov. 22, 1963. (June has requested that her married name, which she still uses in business, not be printed.)

Despite privacy concerns, she's pushing for the release of all records pertaining to the assassination. "We have to get the Government to move before it's too late."

**Q:** What are your thoughts on Norman Mailer's new book?

**A:** I don't have a comment on it as far as its conclusions because I haven't read them, but I did start the book. Mailer is such a great writer; I was just so enthralled. The first chapter opens with my family, and he goes way back to my great-grandmother in Russia. This is material I never would have known about insofar as my mother's side of the family, because my mother was illegitimate, you know. It's a little bit like opening a family album you didn't know existed before.

I can tell you that I am very excited about the book in concept. I believe he's the first writer-researcher to get interviews with sources in the Russian Government and so this is an opportunity to shed new light on the subject from an area that has never been explored in any meaningful depth.

**Q:** To what extent have you followed the various conspiracy theories?

**A:** It's only in recent years that I've started to get

PHOTOGRAPH BY LAURA WILSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



involved in all that, mostly as part of trying to get the records released.

There was a bill passed at the end of the Bush Administration that required all Government agencies to review their files for any information related to the assassination and to release it — unless they felt there were matters of national security or a couple of other issues. The law said that if they felt that way, then those documents needed to be turned over to the Assassination Records Review Board and those folks would review the records and either concur, release them in blacked-out state or release them entirely.

Q: Over the years, you've kept a pretty low profile. Why have you started to speak out?

A: Well, there was a lot of misinformation being released related to a book, "Case Closed," by Gerald Posner. And they got my mother on television in a live interview — she still doesn't have a good grasp of the language — and they were asking her specific questions about this book. She hadn't read it. I felt they manipulated her and made her look foolish.

I had already written a letter to President Clinton to try to make sure he would appoint this review board from the Bush legisla-

tion to review assassination records, and to release those records. I was really supportive. Since I hadn't gotten a response, I toyed with the idea that I might have to go public. When my mother came on and this interview went so badly, I decided I really wanted to rebut.

Q: I guess you must be encouraged that the review board was finally sworn in last year.

A: Yes, I'm also very excited about that. They first met last April in Washington. And there have been public hearings there and in Dallas and Boston.

Q: What is the status of your present-day identity? It sounds as if most people are not aware you're Lee Oswald's daughter.

A: Yes and no. Now, Mom does articles that she doesn't bother to tell me she's doing, and sometimes my name comes up. We always used my stepfather's name, Porter, growing up, even though we were never legally adopted. My secretary in my last job put two and two together

based on one of those articles. She copied it and put it on all my staff's desks.

I didn't really want to be the center of gossip in this whole building. So I called my staff in, a group of 10 or so, and I said: "Yes, that is me in the article. Obviously, if I'd wanted to share that I would have told everyone a long time ago. I don't think it's relevant to anything we do here and I appreciate you keeping it to yourself."

My biggest concern was that people at the office had my home address and phone number and I didn't want it leaked to *The National Enquirer*. I have two small children, I'm divorced, I didn't want people to harass the kids.

Q: Give me an example of what you'd consider harassment.

A: When I was pregnant with my first, some lady got my phone number and called in the middle of the night. And she said, "June Oswald?" That catches you off guard when you just wake up. And I said, "Yes?" And she said: "I'm so-and-so, and I just

some quote-unquote assassination research. So I ended up supporting him. Anyway, the only person I knew up there was Priscilla Johnson McMillan, who wrote my mother's book. We stayed with her for the summer.

My boyfriend would sneak down to Priscilla's basement and read all her old files. He sold an article for an astronomical amount back then — I think it was \$25,000. The way I finally woke up was, one night he said, "I'm gonna sell an article to *Penthouse* or *Playboy*" — I forget which — "and it's about your mother. I'm convinced that your mother and Priscilla had a sexual relationship." So I said, O.K., this is it. Just get out.

Q: Tell me about growing up in the aftermath of the assassination. I know you were just a toddler, but do you have any recollections of turbulence in the household?

A: I don't have any real memories of those ages. I know some people can remember vividly like it was yesterday, but I don't do that —

started to explain who our father was — that it wasn't Kenneth — and who Lee was and what he had done. I just remember crying a lot because Mom was crying.

Q: How old were you then?

A: It would have been, like, first grade. And then, they tell a story about how after that I stood up in front of the whole class and said, "My father shot the President." Just out of the blue. But I don't remember that.

The next memory I actually have is in second grade. We were studying the Presidents. The Presidents were all around the walls in the rooms. And we got to President Kennedy and I was told to go across the hall during that one. So I sat across the hall in a time-out room.

Q: How did you feel about being singled out?

A: I remember what I did during that time-out was, I plotted how I could run for class president and win! So I never connected it as a big negative or anything.

Rachel felt differently. She has always felt really bogged down by it. She didn't feel like Kenneth was her dad. She wanted to know Lee; she wants Lee to be a saint. Well, I was satisfied with my dad, so I've never felt this big need to

connect with Lee or do the daughter-father thing.

Q: One can't help but notice that you address him as "Lee."

A: I've always called him that. My father is Kenneth Porter, the man I grew up with, the man who was there for my mother and Rachel and me.

Q: And if someone were to show scientifically that Lee Oswald was or wasn't involved, that wouldn't make a difference to you?

A: It would make a difference in the sense of justice being served. If the truth can be found that shows Lee had nothing to do with the assassination, I would feel better in that there have been a lot of things said and done regarding my family that all proceeded from an erroneous perception of what he did or didn't do.

But you have to understand that, aside from what role he had in the assassination, there's the issue of what role he had in our family. I know that in my life, Lee wasn't a good man. He wasn't much of a husband, he wasn't much of a father.

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**'We were studying the Presidents,' in second grade. 'And we got to President Kennedy and I was told to go across the hall. So I sat across the hall in a time-out room.'**

---

want you to know that I've written a song about you — and your child. And I'm gonna be in Dallas, and I want to sing it to you."

I said I appreciate it, but I really don't get involved in that. You try to be nice because you don't want to make somebody upset who's going to seek you out if they're kooky enough to do that stuff anyway.

There's always been this little group that's followed us — Mom, Rachel and me — and calls us and is fascinated by anything surrounding us. My first serious boyfriend — that's what he was fascinated about. He tracked me down. He said things when we were together like he really wanted to have children because "that would be the blood of Lee Harvey Oswald that was flowing through the kids."

So he moved to Boston and wanted me to join him. I move all the way up there, and his parents wouldn't even let us stay in his house because I was the daughter of Lee Harvey Oswald. They said it would depreciate the value of their home.

Then I find out he's been doing

even about yesterday.

I do remember that our phones were tapped. We always had this really bad connection, and when you'd pick up the phone you'd hear that other click. This was before wiretapping got more sophisticated. For all I know it's still tapped.

Mom was always overprotective of us. We didn't use the Oswald name, and it didn't come up a lot around the house except when reporters would call. It was always a big deal in November, when it was very stressful in the house. Mom would smoke all the time. Reporters came over and she would tell us, "Shhhh, go in the other room."

Q: When were you actually told about your father and the assassination?

A: Something had come up where Mom had old boxes of letters out. People sent us money following the assassination, because Mom was young with two small children and didn't speak the language.

Somehow those boxes came down and she was reading, and I guess she felt it was time to tell us. She sat us down, with my stepbrother, and



He beat my mother. There were times when we didn't have milk to drink. We lived in poor housing, or were taken in by others. So if I'm able to be detached or seem cold and unemotional about it, it's because I look at Lee in those terms.

Q: I assume you've seen the footage of Lee being shot by Jack Ruby. Are you able to maintain the same detachment when you see that?

A: The first time I saw it I was very upset, but it gets to the point where it almost becomes unreal, this movie you're watching that has very little to do with you as a person.

Mostly I feel bad that Lee was never able to tell his story. He tried to after the arrest but everybody discounted it. I would have liked for him to have his day in court.

Q: Where do you stand today as far as your perception of what really happened out there in Dealey Plaza?

A: I've never publicly said one way or the other for sure. There are a lot of assassination buffs who have analyzed all the technical data and the other available material and even they don't agree about what happened.

Q: But are you comfortable with the fact that Lee Oswald played at least some role?

A: I think there definitely is circumstantial evidence that could imply he had something to do with it because of the characters he was hanging out with in New Orleans. But you know, just because you're hanging out with a weird group — they could have set him up, and he could have had no idea what was going on that day.

Q: Did you ever take the so-called assassination tour?

A: Not until recently. I went on a car trip up to the house I had lived in with Lee, Lee's boarding house, another house Mom had lived in with Lee that's still standing, the path of the motorcade, where the bullets hit.

Q: How did you feel about that?

A: It was — unusual. I didn't break down and cry or anything. It was just kind of eerie.

Q: I'm sure there must have been a lot of unusual incidents as you were growing up.

A: I remember Rachel's seventh-grade dance. So this little boy she was going with, his parents were going to come get her and they were going to go to the dance.

Well, we're all waiting, and a car pulls up in the driveway, and Mom rushes out to greet these parents, and they happen to be a man and a woman, and they've got a camera, and she says: "Oh, you're gonna take pictures! Great!" And she's just welcoming them with open arms. And they say: "Oh, we can take pictures? Oh great!"

Another car pulls up — and that's the parents and the little boy. The first car was *The National Enquirer*. But it was so funny because Mom talked to them for — I mean, nobody noticed that the date wasn't there!

During college, Rachel supported herself at the Texas Chili Parlor in Austin. It's right across from the Capitol, and she was a waitress. Well, there's a travel guide she found out

usually end up telling people that I'm seeing very often. And I'll tell you why: It could come up at any minute.

Q: Did you see the "Seinfeld" episode in which they're at the ball park, and they get spat upon, and —

A: The "second spitter," right. It was hilarious.

Q: If someone was to ask you today who your father is, what would you say? Whom do you really think of as dad?

A: Kenneth. Now, the word father does mean Lee to me. But dad is Dad.

And you know, it's not Lee's fault he got killed by Jack Ruby. I don't blame him for not being here for me. I do blame him for having beat my

like. Are they going to take after some ancestor we don't even know? There's a lot of genetic things you can't even control that are inborn in your kids.

Q: How are things between you and your mom these days?

A: The last two years have been very stressful, because she started doing things that she hasn't let us know about, then all of a sudden I hear about it or see it on TV. Like she did a movie and it involved me and Rachel, and she didn't tell us first. I think her physical health and mental health have been damaged in recent years over all of the pressures put on her.

Q: After all this time?

A: Part of it was the big anniversary, the 30th. There were a lot of things leading up to that that they wanted Mom to do, and Mom in recent years has gotten more and more involved, I guess because she's getting older and trying to rectify some of the things she may have done unintentionally — like stating publicly that Lee did it. I've never seen her act like that, like she needed to become more of a crusader, and it's taking its toll.

Q: On your relationship with her as well?

A: It has put certain strains on it. Mom accused me one day of being ashamed of who I was. I don't think that's true. It's not a matter of being ashamed, it's a matter of wanting to be judged as June Oswald and not "the daughter of Lee Harvey Oswald."

Q: Do you and Rachel argue much about this?

A: Yes. Just in recent years; but yes. We are very close — except when these kinds of things come up.

See, this is the difference. We visited the set of "J.F.K." when it was going on, and somebody said, "Your father was a hero." Well, that's what Rachel wants to believe. Rachel loved listening to that. She got all caught up, because she wants so badly to have this identification with her father.

That didn't set well with me. If they could prove somehow that he was innocent, he'd still not be a hero, he'd be a martyr. I have to remind Rachel that this is the man who beat our mother, who didn't provide for his children. I tell her, "Rachel, for all we know, we could have been living in the streets." Because that's mostly what I think of when I think of Lee.

As for what his exact role in the assassination was — well, he'll have to be judged for that before God. ■



Marina and June Oswald, 22 months, at Lee Harvey's funeral on Nov. 25, 1963.

about that actually listed the Texas Chili Parlor and said the daughter of Lee Harvey Oswald worked there. So she became sort of a tourist attraction.

Q: Your childhood doesn't sound like it was easy.

A: Mom kept us together. She was pretty strong. I don't know if I could've done it and kept my sanity: two small children, don't speak the language, dirt poor, everybody in the country pointing their finger at you — hating you in some cases. I'm a strong woman, but I don't know if I could've kept myself together. But she did. She kept herself together for us.

Q: Was any of this an issue in your marriage?

A: No. My husband couldn't have cared less. But I still have problems in that area, because I date a lot. I always feel torn by whether I'm required to tell somebody about my history. I

mother, and not being a good father — or a good provider. Because some people have called me and said, "I knew your father and he really loved you." I have to admit that when I heard that he used to play with me all the time, that was a nice feeling. I try to hold that in the back of my head.

Q: Do you worry about telling your children as they grow up?

A: I do. I started worrying about, first of all, do I have a responsibility to tell them? What do I tell them? And I realize that I'm kind of cold about it, so how do I tell them? Do I need to be more compassionate about it? I want to make sure they understand why I'm so matter-of-fact about it. But see, I'm matter-of-fact about a lot in my life.

The other thing is, you just worry genealogically. Lee was illegitimate, and so was my mother. I've wondered what my kids are going to turn out

# Book Review

April 30, 1995  
Section 7 Copyright © 1995 The New York Times

4-30-95  
DEAR HAR,  
AFTER READING THIS REVIEW, I AM MORE CONVINCED THAN EVER "WHO DONE IT"  
WHAT IS YOUR REVIEW OF THIS SAGA?  
P.S. LATER OF MY TRIP TO ISRAEL & JORDAN SHALOM! JOE

## The Mind of The Assassin

Norman Mailer pursues the secrets of Lee Harvey Oswald.

### OSWALD'S TALE

An American Mystery.  
By Norman Mailer.  
38 pp. New York:  
Random House. \$30.

By Thomas Powers

IF Jack Ruby had trusted the American legal system to deal with the killer of Jack Kennedy, or if he had been delayed another five minutes at the Western Union office where he'd gone to send a money order that Sunday morning, or if he had been halted at the door of the Dallas police station, or if he had been searched and his gun seized, or if his gun had been deflected and his bullet had gone two inches either way, then Norman Mailer's leviathan volume "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery," along with many of its predecessors, would never have been written. Lee Harvey Oswald in prison for decade after decade — surfacing in the news whenever parole boards met, but otherwise forgotten, like Sirhan Sirhan, James Earl Ray, Arthur Bremer, John Hinckley — would have faded back down to size. It is Oswald dead and unexplained that excites suspicion. We needed a good long look in order to forget him.

One of the questions Oswald eventually might have answered was, Why Kennedy? The 26 volumes of evidence collected by the Warren Commission in its investigation of the assassination reveal nothing in Oswald's life to match Mailer's long obsession with this President. Some months before Oswald smuggled his Italian rifle into the Texas School Book Depository, he used it to take a shot at a very different target, Maj. Gen. Edwin A. Walker, while he sat at his desk one night in Dallas in April 1963.

Why Walker? The retired general had been in the news. He had a small reputation as a right-wing zealot and demagogue. He lived only a bus ride away. Local newspapers reported his return from a well-publicized speaking tour a day or two before Oswald was fired from a printing company, where he held the only job he ever liked. Oswald had recently purchased the rifle by mail for \$22. His marriage to Marina Prusakova was a dank hell of hurt feelings. So Oswald scouted Walker's residence, approached it by dark, fired a single shot and then hurried home to listen

Continued on page 32

Thomas Powers is the author of "Heisenberg's War: The Secret History of the German Bomb."



JULIAN ALLEN

## Samuel Hynes on World War II Memoirs/12

ately inserted into the Soviet Union by the C.I.A. on a mission of espionage.

K.G.B. counterintelligence officers bring no sense of humor to such questions. They investigated Oswald as if he were Trotsky returned from the dead, beginning with a meticulous examination of questions like whether Oswald was secretly fluent in Russian despite the appearance of halting incomprehension; whether he brought to his work in the radio factory a suspiciously deep knowledge of electronics; whether on outings with a local hunting club he betrayed undue curiosity about forbidden zones. The K.G.B. watchers followed Oswald daily; his friends were interrogated; his apartment was bugged; and his conversations, consisting frequently of crazily painful quarrels with Marina, were recorded and transcribed. These domestic miseries reassured the K.G.B. that Oswald was not in fact a master spy but a pathetic nonentity.

**"STEPAN,"** the K.G.B. officer in charge of street surveillance of Oswald, is presented to us by Mailer in a seven-page life that is to my mind one of the greatest encapsulations of the soul of the policeman to be found anywhere in literature.

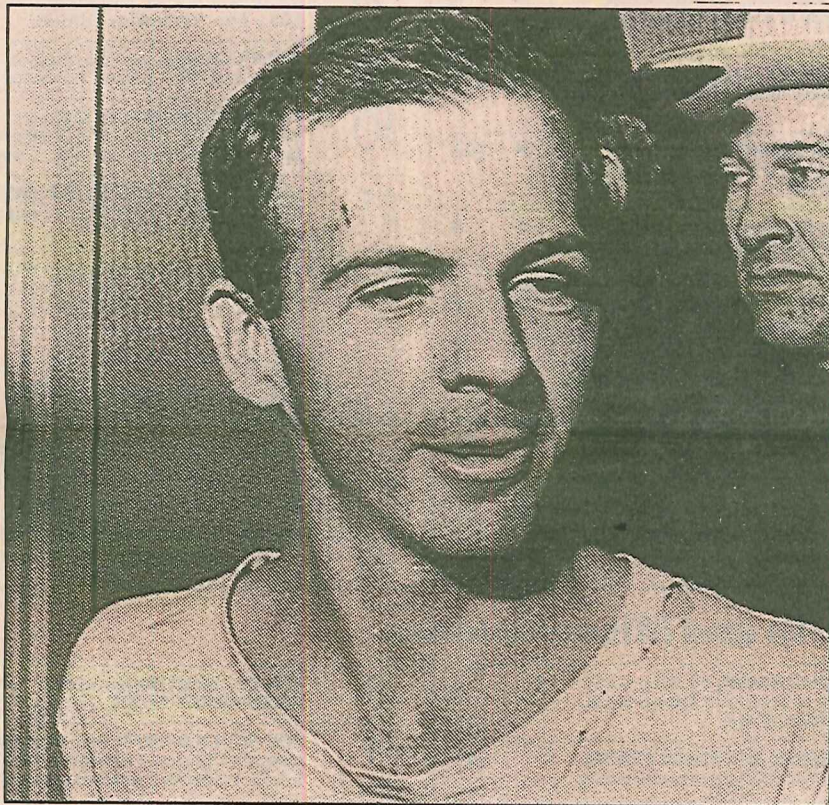
"Asked one more time to give his opinion of Oswald's case," Mailer writes, "he says it proved to be 'primitive — a basic case,' because it did not involve anyone of extreme intelligence. Nor did it cost too much money. Oswald did not have a large circle of friends and was not erratic in his behavior. It wasn't as if one week he had three friends and by the following week had accumulated twenty so they had to increase their budget immediately to watch twenty people instead of three. No, this case was simple because it did not have variables, it did not fluctuate, and finally there wasn't much that really raised a lot of new questions."

The second book in Mailer's tome, "Oswald in America," is completely different. There is nothing new in it. Mailer has declined to phone up all the old witnesses with all the old questions. Instead, for his account of Oswald's slow progress toward the awful day, Mailer resorts to the record, which turns out to include not only the mountains of testimony and evidence collected by the Warren Commission but also three published books: Edward Jay Epstein's "Legend" (1978), which suggests without actually claiming that Oswald was part of some broader conspiracy; Gerald Posner's "Case Closed" (1993), which argues with an awesome command of evidentiary detail that Oswald did it, period; and the already mentioned "Marina and Lee." Of the three Mailer depends by far the most heavily on Ms. McMillan's book, quoting from it scores of passages and thousands of words, for which right he paid a modest sum.

With these materials Mailer has fashioned a narrative history of Oswald's life and deeds. In style it is workmanlike and thorough. In whole chapters, Mailer writes, it will be his job simply "to guide each transcript to its proper placement on the page." Mailer the author comes to roaring life only with his "speculations," some of which set a new record even for Mailer for defying the law of gravity. Of the never-quite-explained death of one of Oswald's fellow marines in the Philippines, who died of a gunshot wound

entering beneath the arm and exiting through the neck, Mailer writes that it is "an undeclared possibility" he was murdered by a man performing fellatio! And it is "not inconceivable" that that man was Oswald! For this there is no trace of a wisp of a shred of evidence. But "if" it were true, imagine what an effect it would have had on him! In Mailer this sort of extravagance is a sign of irrepressible high spirits.

In soberer fashion he pauses in his narrative with irritating frequency to consider possible evidence of unseen hands. It's my guess that even the most indifferent reader has heard most of the "what abouts" before. What about the shadowy figures of Guy Banister and David Ferrie, who passed within Oswald's orbit in New Orleans? What about the Cuban woman Sylvia Odio, who says Oswald and two secret operatives visited her on a certain night in Dallas in September 1963? What about the mysterious George de Mohrenschildt, who knew Oswald, knew C.I.A. officers and shot himself after passing on dark hints to a writer in 1977? What about the Mafia heavies Jack Ruby knew? Like a Natty Bumppo of the political wilderness, Mailer pauses by each bent twig and bruised blade of grass, looking for signs of a passing



Lee Harvey Oswald in police custody on Nov. 23, 1963, the day after Kennedy's assassination.

herd of conspiratorial buffalo. None of it goes anywhere.

But the central body of the story, while familiar in outline, has lost none of its power, and Mailer draws us into its spell. From the Dallas papers, Oswald learned that the President's motorcade would pass the Texas School Book Depository, where he worked. On Thursday, Nov. 21, the day before the assassination, he told a friend at his job that he needed to pick up some curtain rods. The friend drove him out to the Dallas suburb where Marina was staying with the children. That evening Marina rejected Oswald's plea that she move back in with him; during the night he kicked away her foot when she touched him in bed. In the morning he left money on the bureau — more than he had ever left before. He also left his wedding ring — something he had never done. He busied himself in the garage with an object wrapped in a blanket. He drove back into Dallas for work carrying his brown paper parcel of "curtain rods."

So it goes — one relentless detail pressing on another, through the killing, the arrest, the time in jail, the panic of wife and mother and brother, the terrible moment when Jack Ruby lunged through the police line and fired the single pistol bullet that denied us forever Oswald's tale as he might have told it himself.

But Mailer has not forgotten his existential errand. To the familiar story he has added a careful gloss of his own. His goal is to give Oswald an inner life commensurate with his deed, to chart the future assassin's thoughts as he sought frantically for some combination of act and stance that would express his own sense of worth. That Oswald rated this very highly Mailer does not doubt, nor does he scoff. In Oswald's own mind, Mailer suggests, the man who dressed himself in black for a portrait with his gun is a kind of "private-general." The public Oswald is as low in the formal rank of things as a buck private in the Army. But the secret Oswald is a marshaler of great forces, a driver of history, a general on the level of Hannibal or Napoleon. On the eve of the private-general's apotheosis, Mailer writes, "Oswald has reached that zone of serenity that some men attain before combat, when anxiety is deep enough to feel like quiet exaltation." After the killing Oswald spent the final two days of his life in jail, "gathering in some vast multiple of all the attention he had been denied for most of his life."

At the end of his book Mailer approaches his own quiet exaltation, the moment when the evidence has been presented and the author must tell us without prevarication what he thinks it means. Mailer has Oswald firmly in mind now. The doubts have all been put aside. "Every insight we have gained of him," he writes, "suggests the solitary nature of his act."

Why Kennedy? "It was the largest opportunity he had ever been offered."

**M**AILER is not the first historian of the assassination to remark on Oswald's aggrandizing ego. Priscilla Johnson McMillan took the measure of the man with great precision nearly 20 years ago. But Mailer is the first deliberately to treat Oswald's estimate of himself with respect. A fine title for his book, he writes, would have been "An American

Tragedy," reminding us of his hope that a "tragic" Oswald would somehow soften the blow of Kennedy's murder and thereby save us from the despair of living in an "absurd" universe. It took courage and generosity for Mailer to conceive of this mighty rescue operation.

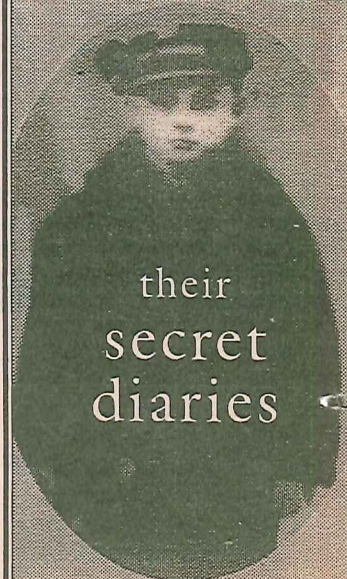
Does it work?

For success Mailer must draw on a reader's reserves of human empathy here, and I am afraid mine are not quite up to the job. I was never confused about who killed Kennedy, and the fact that Oswald wanted attention does not make me feel better. I admire Mailer for his effort to understand Oswald, but at some level I feel invited to place a sympathetic arm around the killer's shoulder, and I'm not about to do it. "Oswald's Tale" brings us right up to the pinch-lipped misery and sour odor of the man. He brought pain to many and happiness to none. Anger is what this makes me feel. It was an insect that brought Kennedy down. Would to God he had popped first beneath somebody's foot. □

*"It is as possible to describe our suffering as to drink up the ocean."*

—Polish boy, Lodz Ghetto, age unknown

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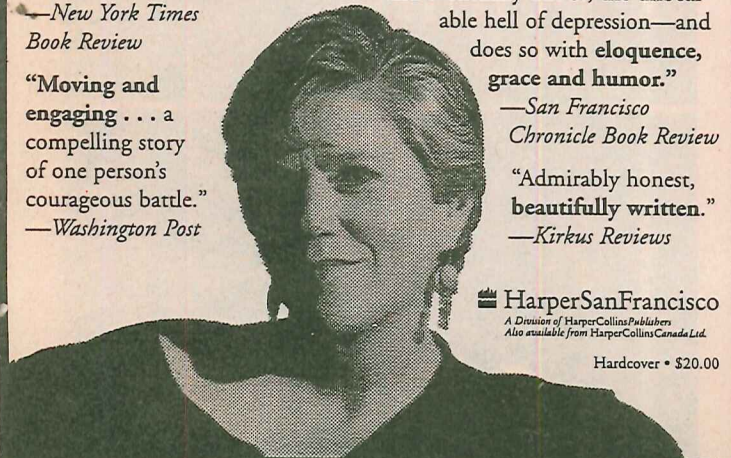
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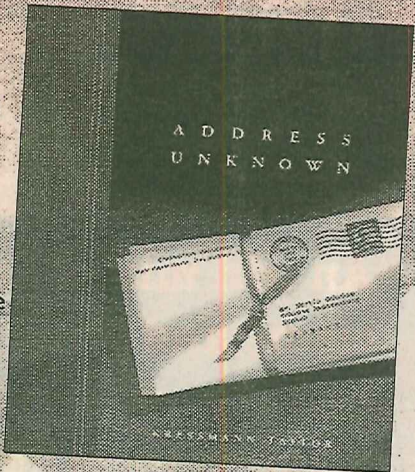
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## The Mind of the Assassin

Continued from page 1

breathlessly to the radio to learn if he had succeeded. He had not.

Oswald told Marina, "Look how many people would have been spared if somebody had eliminated Hitler." But Oswald could have made no serious case that Walker was really an embryonic Hitler. Walker was little more than a name to him. It would be fairer to say that Oswald was in a murderous mood and Walker happened by.

**T**HAT such a blind and meaningless chain of contingency could be all the explanation offered by history for the long national trauma of the murder of John F. Kennedy is more than Norman Mailer is willing to accept without a struggle — an 828-page struggle, in point of fact. In "Oswald's Tale" Mailer argues that if we ascribe this great event to Oswald acting by himself, prompted by his own prosaic agonies, guided by luck to hit a moving target at 88 yards when he had missed Walker at 35, then we concede that "we live in a universe that is absurd." This Mailer is not about to do. "It... is more tolerable," he says, if we can see Kennedy's killer as "tragic rather than absurd."

So Mailer's self-appointed task in his 28th book is to provide Oswald's life with some stature beyond a few seconds of lucky shooting. Previous attempts to give Kennedy's murder a cause as big as the consequence have generally tried to dismiss Oswald as little more than a plain foot soldier — a patsy — in a dark machine of conspiracy. Mailer tells us he began his own existential errand "with a prejudice in favor of the conspiracy theorists." But despite much probing of the Warren Commission's lone-assassin version of the deed, it is pretty clear that from the outset Mailer was not really looking for, and certainly did not expect to find, phantom shooters on the grassy knoll, rogue C.I.A. officers, K.G.B. specialists in assassinations ("wet affairs"), anti-Castro zealots, Mafia hit men or any of the other candidate conspirators provided by central casting over the years. What Mailer went looking for was the soul of the man who squeezed the trigger.

"Oswald's Tale" is two books. They are completely different in style and method. Either one of these books published alone would have been a minor affair. The two together are breathtaking in ambition and ask more than readers may be prepared to give. Let's look at them in order.

In the fall of 1959 in Moscow, the former marine Lee Harvey Oswald "defected" to Russia — that is, he made such a scene that Soviet authorities reluctantly granted his application for residence. For 30 months he lived in the Byelorussian city of Minsk, where he worked (none too hard) in a factory that assembled radios, lived in a one-room apartment grand by Soviet standards, eventually learned pretty good Russian, married a Russian woman and was watched with obsessive care by the local office of the K.G.B. In May 1962, after a year of struggle with Soviet and American bureaucracies, Oswald engineered his return to the United States with his new wife and infant daughter.

While the cold war lasted, this blank period of Oswald's life offered a kind of terra incognita for the plotting required by assassination theorists if their conspiracies were to be plausible. One British writer, for example, argued that the real Oswald had been replaced during the Minsk years by a Soviet look-alike who then "returned" to America, killed Kennedy and was exposed (by the British author) only after an autopsy revealed that the dead Oswald was too tall to be the real Oswald. This bizarre tale depended heavily on the fact that investigators could not go to Russia, let alone Minsk, and nose around.

But the terra was not really incognita. A rich and vivid account of Oswald's life in Minsk was published in 1977 by Priscilla Johnson McMillan after extended conversations with Oswald's widow. Despite strong reviews (including an enthusiastic one, in these pages, by me), Ms. McMillan's book, "Marina and Lee," made no deep impression on the

public, which was unready to recognize, much less accept, Oswald's humanity, while the professional assassination scholars darkly suspected that Marina (and perhaps even Ms. McMillan!) might be part of the plot.

It was into this still (relatively) virgin territory that Mailer entered after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, armed with promises of access to onetime K.G.B. officers and previously secret files as well as to the many former Soviet citizens who had known Marina Prusakova or Oswald during his years in Minsk. The result of six months of interviews by Mailer and his colleague Lawrence Schiller with about 50 Russians is "Oswald in Minsk With Marina," the roughly 350-page self-contained "Volume 1" of "Oswald's Tale."

Oswald was only 20 when he arrived in Minsk. His experience of the world had been limited to a stint in the Marines. He was severely dyslexic, had done poorly in school, had been moved repeatedly by his hysterically narcissistic mother throughout his childhood, fancied himself a student of Marxism and had begun a "Historic Diary" to record his discoveries in the homeland of Communism. Oswald's Russian was self-taught and rudimentary. He had no skills. He tended to fall in love with every woman who crossed his path.

The world Oswald found in Minsk was colorless, impoverished, lonely and dull. His friends all put in six-day workweeks and went home to cramped lives in tiny apartments. They yearned for material possessions of the humblest sort, were a little awestruck at knowing an actual American, trembled when called on the carpet by "the Organs," as they called the secret police. The young men Oswald knew were all looking for girls, the women were looking for husbands, and Marina and Lee, after the twists and turns usual to courtship, found each other. Some marriages go wrong slowly over years; Marina and Lee appear to have plunged into pain and recrimination almost immediately, and while Marina herself thought that in some ways — sexually, for example — things gradually improved during their years together, to Mailer their marriage seems like the death of a thousand cuts.

**A**LL of this is described wonderfully well. Mailer's account adds many new characters and incidents to the story told by Ms. McMillan, but it is also distinguished by a brilliant linguistic invention, a kind of Mailer-patent Russian-English that captures Russian rhythms not only of language but also of thinking and feeling about love, work and the ways of the world. Oswald's Intourist guide when he first arrived in Moscow in 1959 was a young woman named Rimma Shirakova. After a suicide attempt that persuaded the authorities to let Oswald stay, Mailer writes in a typical passage, "Rimma's relationship with Lee became a good deal closer. He was very much like a relative now — but not a brother, not a boyfriend, in between. He wanted to kiss her and was ready to try, but she didn't want that. She never kissed him at all, not ever... Certainly not. She had a boyfriend... A Russian writer said once, 'It's better to die than to kiss without love,' and good girls were of that same opinion. If she didn't love him and didn't want close relations, then she should not kiss. So she patted him on his hand. Enough. Her psychology."

The style of "Oswald in Minsk With Marina" is like a novel stripped of everything but the story. There are no cumbersome asides to track great events off stage, no boring travelogues, no Tolstoyan speculations on fate and history. What we get is Oswald plain.

In this marvelous book within a book we learn two things. The first is that Oswald was unhappy to the root. When he got what he wanted, he grew restless and angry and ruined what he had. The second contribution of "Oswald in Minsk" to the story of the Kennedy assassination is to be found in Mailer's account of the investigations of two pseudonymous officers of the K.G.B., whose job was to establish whether or not Oswald had been deliber-

# Closing the Case of Sirhan

*An investigator abandons conspiracy theories, his own included.*

## THE KILLING OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY

*An Investigation of Motive, Means, and Opportunity.*

By Dan E. Moldea.

Illustrated. 342 pp. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. \$27.50.

By Gerald Posner

**T**HE assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in 1968 seemed a relatively straightforward case for police investigators. Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, a 24-year-old Palestinian immigrant, was tackled as he emptied his eight-shot .22-caliber revolver in a crowded pantry of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, killing the Senator and wounding five bystanders. At his mother's house, where he lived, Mr. Sirhan had left a damning trail of notebooks that were larded with declarations like "R.F.K. must die!" He was convicted of murder by a Los Angeles jury, but his death sentence was voided by the California Supreme Court and he remains incarcerated in a special housing unit at a state prison.

But what initially appeared an open-and-shut case gradually became the subject of persistent conspiracy speculation, as apparently contradictory ballistics evidence and eyewitness testimony raised the haunting suspicion that two guns had been fired on the night of the celebration of Senator Kennedy's victory in the California Democratic Presidential primary.

The steadfast refusal of both the Los Angeles Police Department and the District Attorney's office to release any files heightened the public skepticism. A major critic of the official investigation was Dan E. Moldea, a self-described "mob reporter," who first wrote about the possibility of two guns in 1987 for *Regardie's* magazine.

In "The Killing of Robert F. Kennedy," a persuasive re-examination of the assassination, Mr. Moldea does what many journalists would lack the courage for — admit that his earlier work was wrong. "I must painfully disassemble the evidence of a second gunman that I have both collected and uncovered over the years," he writes. His new conclusion — "Sirhan Bishara Sirhan consciously and knowingly murdered Senator Robert Kennedy, and he acted alone" — is amply supported by prodigious research, including many first-time interviews with dozens of police officers involved in the investigation.

This book presents a remarkable turnaround for a writer who had partly staked his reputation on the existence of a second shooter. But because of the honesty and logic with which he approaches his study, Mr. Moldea's journalistic instincts have never looked sharper.

If students of the assassination or fans of Mr. Moldea's earlier work think that this less sensational resolution of the case is not as interesting as a conspiracy theory, they're mistaken. Mr. Moldea presents the story in three stages: the actual assassination, together with Mr. Sirhan's background and the official investigation; the growth of controversies and conspiracy theories; and the author's re-examination. How Mr. Moldea separates good leads from bogus ones, how he eliminates key suspects (he arranges for a polygraph of Thane Eugene Cesar, a security guard conspiracy theorists long suspected as the second shooter, for example), and his climactic prison confrontation with Mr. Sirhan in 1994 make for far more interesting reading than any conspiracy theory based on hearsay and speculation.

Gerald Posner is the author of "Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK."



FROM "THE KILLING OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY"

Senator Robert F. Kennedy claiming victory in the California Democratic Presidential primary on the night of June 4, 1968.

Beyond presenting what is likely to be the best understanding of what actually happened on June 5, 1968, Mr. Moldea is stinging in his criticism of shoddy work by the Los Angeles Police Department. One is left with little doubt that the police mishandling of the investigation set the precedent for much of the later conspiracy conjecture. Moreover, despite repeated vows by officials investigating Senator Kennedy's murder that they would not repeat the mistakes of the inquiry into the assassination of his brother, government and law enforcement resistance to any public release of information about the case insured just the opposite: that a public already suspicious of "official" conclusions and eager to embrace conspiracy theories concluded the secretiveness was evidence of a cover-up. Mr. Moldea pinpoints much incompetence and negligence, but not the cover-up of a murder.

**M**R. MOLDEA dedicates the book to his writing coach, Nancy Nolte, and properly so, because this is the best written of his books, finished in a clear and easy style. The book does stumble from time to time, however, with occasional repetition, a couple of outdated paragraphs about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and a few instances of unnecessarily dramatic prose; for example, Mr. Moldea's description of himself in interviews, becoming fixed on someone "like a cruise missile" or ready to "go for his throat." But these are minor glitches in a treatise that over all is a notable success for its solid reporting.

At the end of his book, in a brief but critical portion, Mr. Moldea speculates about why Sirhan Bishara Sirhan killed Robert F. Kennedy. Rejecting Mr. Sirhan's previous justification — Robert Kennedy's pro-Israeli politics — he paints a disturbing portrait of the assassin. Mr. Moldea reveals Mr. Sirhan as having a "confused life," flirting with "fringes of the occult and an individualized but unsophisticated form of left-wing politics." In Mr. Moldea's picture, Mr. Sirhan was a "desperate young man, somehow losing all hope" — someone who had, Mr. Moldea writes, "decided to make his mark, even if it was by committing a terrible and violent act." The description is remarkably like that of another 24-year-old sociopath, Lee Harvey Oswald, who had crossed the path of another Kennedy five years earlier. □

# BOOKS

## Exalting a nobody



AP FILE PHOTO



PHOTO/NANCY CRAMPTON

Norman Mailer's sprawling attempt to transform Lee Harvey Oswald into a figure equal to the Great Crime

### OSWALD'S TALE

*An American Mystery.*

By Norman Mailer. Random House. 791 pp. \$30.

By Gail Caldwell

**W**hen one ponders the bulk of "Oswald's Tale" — some 3½ pounds in bound galleys, and more than 300,000 words — the inevitable question, of course, is: Why? Why would Norman Mailer, the pugnacious Brando of American letters, choose to get in the ring with the pale assassin? About whom more has already been written than any assassin in history? The reason (this

being Mailer, after all) is both literary and grandiose. The man has spent much of his writing life obsessed with the archetypal loser in American society, whether the 9-foot shadow cast by Gary Gilmore in "The Executioner's Song" or the philosophical psychopaths of his

1957 rabble-rouser essay, "The White Negro." Now, in "Oswald's Tale," he seeks both to free Lee Harvey Oswald from his mythic prison of media clichés and somehow to exalt him, locating within those troubled recesses enough of a character — enough of a madman, or an antihero capable of shattered dreams — to give sense to his role in one of the greatest fissures of American history.

In other words, Mailer wants to make Oswald a Raskolnikov instead of a patsy, or Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths instead of a merely banal and self-aggrandizing narcissist whose actions, solitary or not, changed the world. The task is psychologically understandable, to a degree (Mailer protests the absurdity of a universe where a simple bottom-feeder could destroy a whole ecosystem), but his mission lends itself to a potential for disingenuousness in the name of literary license. We are talking about history and reality, however spectral or subjective; what's more, you cannot make an elephant tango, and you can't make Lee Oswald (as he was known before the assas-

MAILER, Page 80

Gail Caldwell is chief book critic of the Globe.

Marina and Lee Oswald in a 1962 photo-booth picture taken in a Dallas bus station.

# Norman Mailer attempts to exalt a nobody into a figure equal to the Great Crime

■ MAILER

Continued from Page 77

sination made him a three-pronged loser) into a man of Greek dimension. You can only deliver some version of a knowable, or discernible, truth. That is one of the purposes of civilized discourse — to carve sense from the otherwise incomprehensible — and writers, historians and conspiracy theorists have been applying their passion and reason to this particular job for 30 years. What Mailer has added to the search is 800 pages of mostly reworked material from secondary sources, punctuated by odd hypothetical ramblings and pompous asides — on everything from the heroic demands of American manhood to the mechanics of Marina Oswald's wedding night.

The narrator of "Oswald's Tale" is a master of the subjunctive and the conditional: "perhaps," "he must have," "if he had . . ." These are not usually the appropriate qualifiers for political intrigue, particularly when you're going up against testy KGB witnesses, the Warren Commission and Oswald's mother, Marguerite (what a triumvirate!). When Mailer lets go his theorizing, his contribution to the field mostly concerns Oswald's years in the Soviet Union, from 1959 to 1962, where he would marry Marina, read "Das Kapital," alienate most of his fellow workers (he was thought lazy and inconsiderate) and attract the attention of Soviet and American intelligence alike. The Oswald that emerges from these pages is one we already know: He makes a feeble suicide attempt, hits his wife, displays the manipulative grandiosity that would define his future actions. "An unstable character, whose actions are entirely unpredictable," reads a State Department memo in 1961. A year later, he was back in Texas, and a stenographer would produce this memory for the Warren Commission: "He had the dearest eyes I ever saw."

Oswald's Soviet period is the most illuminating part of Mailer's work, for he spent six months in Moscow (with his old sidekick from the Gilmore project, Lawrence Schiller) interviewing dozens of people who had known Oswald. As he did so brilliantly in "The Executioner's Song," Mailer tries to match the scene of his story with a mirroring style. But where the prose of Gilmore's saga evoked the scary silence of a Utah twilight, here that same narrative instinct devolves into a bizarre, halting peasant-speak. Take the description of Oswald's guide in Moscow, who had a brief flirtation with the American: "Of course, for her, as a person, she could certainly kiss him if she wished it that much, but, you see, she did not. Certainly not." Egad.

But Mailer is still Mailer, and sometimes the momentum of "Oswald's Tale" carries us onward: through the quasi-Marxist polemics and psychic disintegration, the Fair Play for Cuba days in New Orleans, the Mannlicher-Carcano 6.5mm carbine ordered from Chicago. The portrait is anchored by the gruesome details of Oswald's life, some gleaned

from five days of new interviews with Marina (who is now in her 50s, remarried and living near Fort Worth). If there is indeed room for tragedy in Oswald's story, it belongs to his young wife, adrift in a foreign country and at the mercy of her husband's tyranny. He may or may not have been a latent homosexual, slept with his Nurse Ratchet mother until he was 11, suffered from dyslexia that became worse under emotional duress. By all accounts, Lee Harvey Oswald was of above-average intelligence and dominated by infantile impulses; if he hadn't succeeded in committing an act of monstrous consequence, his story would be one of thousands like it — of pitiful men whose lives are defined by venomous days and bitter nights. But Oswald's own poison threw him onto history's center stage. That may make him infamous, even the object of obsession, but it still doesn't manage to make him very interesting.

Was he acting alone, or was Oswald indeed a disturbed dupe of various interests, whether the CIA, the Mafia or a right-wing anti-Cuban conspiracy? Was he a fluke of history, used by covert groups whose plots to set up an assassination attempt misfired at the end by becoming true? Mailer sifts through all these possibilities, writing that he began his project "with a prejudice in favor of the conspiracy theorists," but he ends mostly convinced that his subject was a solitary assassin: "If one's personal inclinations would find Oswald innocent, or at least part of a conspiracy, one's gloomy verdict, nonetheless, is that Lee had the character to kill Kennedy, and that he probably did it alone."

The verdict is gloomy because Mailer cannot handle the implications of a lone, psychopathic assassin: This means the universe is out of whack, he insists again and again, and that absurdity reigns. But the universe is absurd, one rails back at Mailer in frustration; don't we have enough evidence of that every day? Tragedy takes its random toll every time a child is killed or an infectious virus boards another airplane. We learned that much from the indifferent gods of "Lear," and the post-Holocaust world confirmed it: that storm clouds of disaster do not discriminate between the righteous and the damned. If Norman Mailer needs to believe otherwise to sleep at night, that's his spiritual prerogative, even if it is a pre-Renaissance conceit. But you can hardly turn it into history, and an attempt to do so seems a rather self-centered quest.

## WHAT SHE WOULD REMEMBER

The morning when Lee left, Friday morning, November 22, 1963, she did not get up with him when he arose very early. She tried to, but he said, "Don't worry. Go back to sleep." And he left quietly.

She had gone to bed after him the night before. He was already asleep or pretended to be. Then, when she woke up in the middle of the night to check on baby Rachel, she took a look at him. The only illumination was by nightlight, very low. But Lee scared her. She touched him with her foot and he kicked it away. Then he lay so still that it was like he had died. He didn't move for the next hour. She said to herself, "Is he alive?" He looked so still. Absolutely gone. She couldn't hear his breath. She had to bend over very close to feel his breathing — she thought he had died on her. Isn't that funny? For all these years she remembered saying, "Thank goodness he's alive." And he made no sound all night and never moved again.

In the morning, he made himself instant coffee, drank it in a plastic cup, and went off to work.

NORMAN MAILER  
From "Oswald's Tale"

Mailer calls himself a "literary usher," bringing in the voices of Marina and Marguerite and the inimitable Baron George De Mohrenschildt to tether his tale. He disappears on several high limbs from time to time, trying to connect Oswald to the infamous COINTELPRO program of the FBI, unfairly discrediting Gerald Posner's recent "Case Closed" for being too serving of the FBI. But Mailer is a novelist, he argues, and novelists have imaginative reach. "Since our hypothesis is not anchored," he postulates about a brief blank space in Oswald's chronology, "let us levitate even higher." Will someone give this man a ladder? Mailer is a great reporter, though there are times in "Oswald's Tale" where he treats his own speculations as though they were tributes to the First Amendment. "Tears are next to tenderness," he writes about Oswald in his last, disintegrating months, when the man would weep openly at the Soviet Embassy in Mexico, waving his revolver. But try as he might, he cannot flesh Oswald out as an antagonist whose depths were worthy of the magnitude of his acts. Whether a patsy or a loner, he suffered from lethal solipsism: Thanatos with a rifle in his hand, he was a little man who hit his wife and killed the president, and for Oswald, both acts were more about him than the subjects of his rage. That's a black-hearted mystery no artifice of tragedy can exalt, and no amount of psychic revisionism can either explain or forgive.

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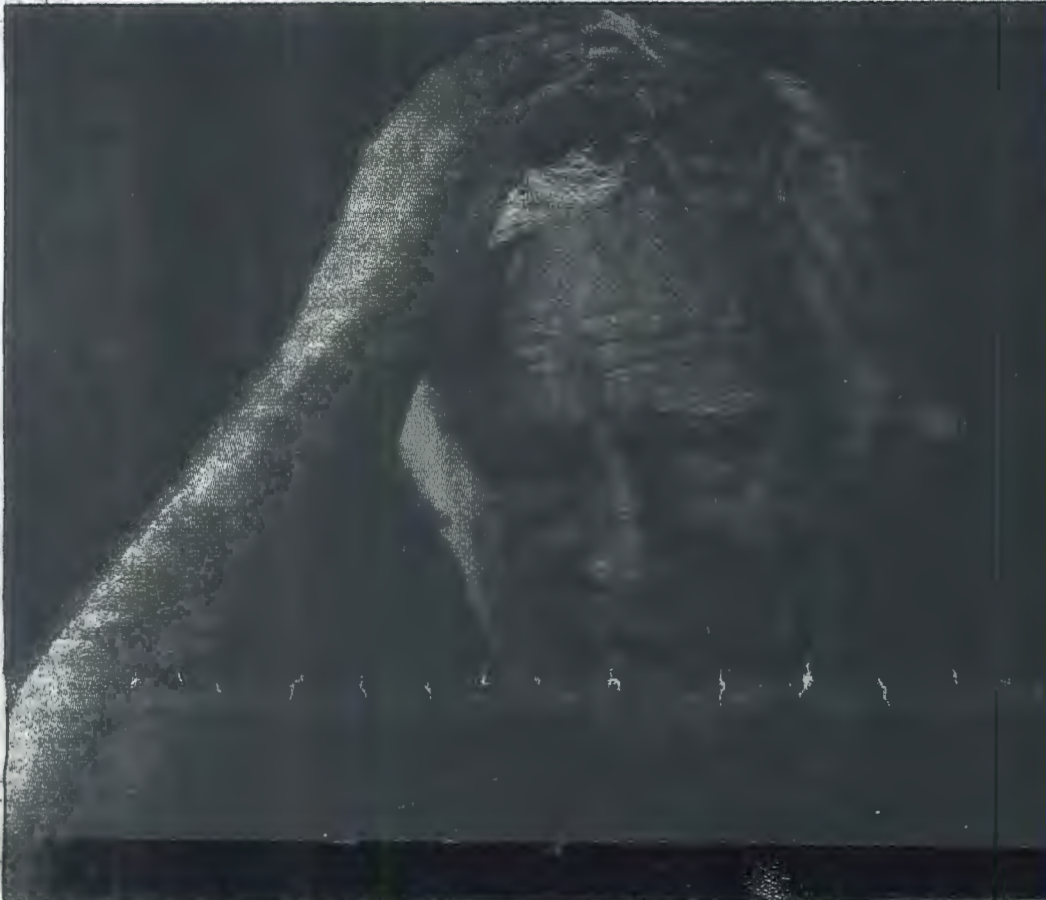
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# STYLE



New book  
strives to make  
Kennedy's  
accused assassin  
'come alive like  
a character  
in a novel'

At 72, Mailer is as prolific as he's been in the nearly 50 years since he wrote "The Naked and the Dead."

EXAMINER / CRAIG

## Mailer on Oswald: 'AN AMERICAN MYSTERY'

By Joan Smith  
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

**I**T IS difficult to imagine voluntarily reading 800 pages about Lee Harvey Oswald, who always seemed such a nonentity, a loser whether he acted alone or played the pawn in a more sinister drama. And when the New Yorker magazine excerpted Norman Mailer's "Oswald's Tale," mostly quoting long passages of the conversations between Oswald and his wife, Marina, taped by the KGB during the 2½ years he lived as a defector in Russia, the piece seemed as petty and unenlightening as eavesdropping itself.

But like most very good books, "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery" can't be reduced to its parts. As he did with Gary Gilmore in "The Executioner's Song," Mailer builds his character with the slow patience of a great novelist, and Oswald emerges, finally, as someone you feel you might understand, someone you can't forget even if you wish you could.

And if Mailer never does answer the big questions — Did Oswald kill John Kennedy and did he do it alone? — he tries to answer something that in the end is far more satisfying, because the literal solution to a mystery is nearly always disappointing. It would never be enough to know that a man named Timothy McVeigh was allegedly responsible for 167 deaths in Oklahoma City. We long to know who he is, how much he is like us or people we know, what it was in him (whether it is something we share) that allowed him to commit the unforgivable.

Mailer's Oswald is, in fact, someone who might have tried to kill a president for reasons you are made to understand, even if you prefer to resist them. A loner, grandiose and insecure, who disliked both the American government he temporarily abandoned in the early 1960s and the Soviet government as he came to understand it, he developed a confused and angry libertarian philosophy that reminds one, in fact, of the world's Timothy McVeighs, though Mailer balks

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## Mailer on Oswald

at the comparison. Oswald had visions of himself as someone who would do something immense and heroic. The one thing Mailer is sure of is that Oswald fired the gun that killed Kennedy. "The Oswald we know would no more have turned his Mannlicher-Carcano 6.5 mm carbine over to someone else than he would have turned over (his wife) Marina."

But Mailer, who was in town recently to promote the book and to appear in a City Arts & Lectures interview with Wendy Lesser, editor of *The Threepenny Review*, says that Oswald reminds him less of today's right-wing terrorists than (rather improbably) of the hippies of the late 1960s. "The Haight-Ashbury in 1968 would have been perfect for him," he says. "You remember his platform — no government, just small groups by voluntary association; no rifles, just shotguns. In that sense he bears some resemblance to these new militia terrorist organizations, but I don't think it was his cup of tea to blow up half a building and kill a great many people indiscriminately. It was his style to pick and kill one person. Indiscriminate slaughter would have been alien to him."

At 72, Mailer is as prolific as he's been in the nearly 50 years since he wrote "The Naked and the Dead," his World War II novel of life in a reconnaissance platoon, and became one of the greatest, and most notorious — brawling, protesting, founding a newspaper (*The Village Voice*), running for public office — writers of the century. He has two hefty volumes coming out this year, the second a biography of Picasso as a young man that will be published in the fall, and he is working on part two of "Harlot's Ghost," his 1991 1,300-page suspense novel about the CIA that ended with the rather trying words, "To be continued." ("Well, it upset me, too," he says, "that I wasn't getting any ideas about how to go forward.")

Mailer told Lesser during their appearance at Herbst Theatre that he does so much writing he rarely has time to read books anymore. "I always say I'll read all these interesting people I read about in reviews 'when I'm done with the book.' And I mean I can't complain. I have a perfectly decent living. But with all those kids (nine, altogether, five of whom work in the theater), I'm always going from book to book, so I never take that half year off I consider essential to catch up on everything."

"Oswald's Tale" was nonetheless a welcome respite from the looming second half of "Harlot's Ghost." Nonfiction, Mailer says, is "a lot easier to write than fiction."

And Mailer was delighted to go to Russia, because he would learn something entirely new about Oswald, ample justification for a book, and because he would learn more about the KGB for his novel.

"What happened was that Larry Schiller, with whom I collaborated on 'The Executioner's Song,' had been working on various projects in Russia for 10 years, off and on, and one day he called and said, 'Listen, I think I can get the KGB's Oswald file. Are you interested?' And of course I was. I thought it would be a wonderful opportunity because nothing was known about what went on with Oswald in Russia."

But Mailer says that breathing life into Oswald was also, for him, a therapeutic exercise. "I don't know if it works this way for anyone else. But Kennedy's death has more meaning for me if we understand the man who did it. If you have a nonentity killing someone like Kennedy, then life is absurd, and if there's anything I hate, it's the possibility that we have all of this for nothing. But I have to add that I am only 75 percent certain of the conclusions I've drawn about Oswald. I mean, I hate people who just lay it out, 'He did it, he was a cockroach, let's forget him.'"

Mailer says he realized early on that he was not going to be able to actually solve the crime. Though it is his strong opinion that Oswald did kill Kennedy, and that he acted alone, he says he can't prove it. "And my assistant, Judith McNally, who is very bright and who worked with me on the entire book, took the same evidence and drew the opposite conclusion — that Oswald was part of a small conspiracy."

Mailer says he himself had long been a conspiracy theorist, "which is why I wanted to be fair in the book because I feel that I am betraying, in a way, a lot of my colleagues." He is still inclined to believe that Oswald may have been

involved in an FBI counterintelligence program, and may have been working for the CIA. But if Oswald was involved in conspiracies, Mailer does not believe that they included a conspiracy to kill the president.

"One of the reasons so many conspiracy theories have germinated over the years is that people sense an immense coverup," he says. "But of course what was being covered up was other stuff. Neither the CIA nor the FBI dared open the door because they had so many secrets to protect."

"To solve the assassination definitively is going to take at least one more commission and probably two or three, if there's any interest left in solving it at all. I think by now most people would rather let it remain a mystery. But I decided that one thing I could do was to make Oswald come alive like a character in a novel, because then at least all of the scenarios we've been given would not be so vague and crazy."

The first half of "Oswald's Tale" is the Russian half, the new material. The KGB's surveillance of Oswald was perpetual and thorough and their files were a chance to listen to Oswald himself, on tape. Mailer uses the Oswald who emerges from those tapes, from interviews Mailer and Schiller did with the Russians Oswald encountered, and from Mailer's own connections and speculations, to illuminate the paper Oswald we already had.

Which is why the more remarkable half is, in some ways, the second. Mailer has been faulted for relying on old material in that portion, particularly Priscilla Johnson McMillan's 1977 biography, "Marina and Lee." But Mailer says he had no interest in mining long-exhausted sources for new evidence. He would use what he had learned about Oswald in Russia to shed new light on what had already been

written, "like seeing someone you knew fairly well 10 years later at a party and knowing, just by seeing them across the room, a lot about what had happened to them even if you never get a chance to speak."

Mailer says the Warren Commission report, which he'd never been able to read — "it's printed such small type it's a hazard" — suddenly came alive. "I could suddenly see very clearly what I wanted to talk about where it was very good and revealing, where it lost headway, so it was fun taking stuff out of that huge thing, 26 volumes, that would make a reasonable narrative without feeling you were forcing warping it."

Despite feeling that he had come to understand Oswald, Mailer says he never did come to like him. "I feel he was tragic, but I don't think he was a psychopathic liar and I don't like liars. They just mess up everything in sight. And he was inflexible in a way. You couldn't have been friends with him because you can't be friends with someone unless you can change their mind and they can change yours a little. But he didn't have guts, so I respect him. But then of course I'm very torn because Jack Kennedy meant a great deal to me and I can hardly be fond of his killer. John Updike once said of the Kennedy assassination that it was as if God had removed his sanction from America. And it is that way, I think. It's as if all the troubles have come upon us since then, as if we were no longer a blessed nation."

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