

# RELIGION

R SATURDAY, MAY 10, 1997 B7

## *Why Mailer Decided to Play Jesus*

By Bill Broadway  
Washington Post Staff Writer

Reviewers have not been kind to Norman Mailer's 30th book, a first-person account of the life and death of Jesus called "The Gospel According to the Son."

Literary critic Frank Kermode, in the New York Review of Books, proclaimed it "a book of considerable intellectual force" but said that infusing Jesus "with a strong dose of Mailer [was] in some measure another self-advertisement." Novelist Reynolds Price, in the New York Times Book Review, applauded Mailer's bold use of the first person but was puzzled by his general lack of inventiveness. "Even the most conservative Christian should find little to reject," Price wrote.

The New Republic crucified Mailer, portraying him on its May 12 cover in a crown of thorns beneath the headline: "He is finished." The Washington Post's Book World was almost as forceful. "I don't like negative reviews, nor am I a Mailer-basher," critic Steven Moore wrote. "But this new one leaves me no choice. It's that bad."

What was Mailer thinking? Why would this literary giant, a swaggering two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, subject himself to possible humiliation? "I knew some of the reviews would be good. Some would be terrible. I took that for granted," Mailer said in an interview in Georgetown last week.

But a compulsion, a desire really, got the best of him, he said. The one-liners he's been serving up to audiences and reporters only begin to explain his motives:

"There are a hundred writers who could do a better job, and I'm one of them."

"Perhaps I wanted to show people I could write a simple book."

"I wanted to retell it the way all writers want to retell a classic story."

The deeper reasons begin with Mailer's

own spiritual search, a sense of emptiness.

Growing up a Jew in "Christian America," Mailer said, he never experienced the full impact of the antisemitism that so affected his parents' generation. "On the other hand, I never felt I was totally part of this country," the 74-year-old writer said. "I always had this nose-against-the-glass feeling that those Christians have something I'm curious about."

This void nagged him for years until an experience in Arkansas made him think that

THE  
GOSPEL  
ACCORDING  
TO THE SON



NORMAN  
MAILER

being a Jew just might make him an appropriate interpreter for the story of Jesus, the "keel" of Western Civilization, as he calls the Gospel narrative. About 10 years ago, he was visiting at a Freewill Baptist Church where his father-in-law is a deacon. Norris Church, Mailer's sixth wife, had told him he was the first Jew she had ever met, and he assumed the same was true for the members of the adult Sunday school class he attended.

"They were delighted," he said. "Because after reading about the Lord Jesus all these years, they finally had met one of [his people's] descendants. My wife said afterwards I was making too much of it, that they're used to being very cordial to visitors. But I had a feeling there was a touch of something beyond that, that maybe I had some special gift to interpret" the Old Testament.

It was then only a short leap to the New Testament, he said, for in living Jesus's life in imagination, he learned how "extremely Jewish" Jesus is: "He worries all the time, he anticipates, he broods on what's going on. There's an immense sense of responsibility."

And the author, who hated Hebrew school and gave up religion after his bar mitzvah, "realized for the first time in many, many years how Jewish I am."

Mailer credits Pope John Paul II for piquing his interest in the New Testament, especially when he read the pope's best-selling personal reflections, "Crossing the Threshold of Hope," published three years ago.

In the mid-1980s, as past president of PEN, a national association of writers, Mailer nominated the pope for honorary membership (he didn't get it) after publication of the encyclical "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis," or "On Social Concerns." The work tells of the social evils of both the capitalist West and the communist East, before the end of the Cold War, and was "written in a beautiful style that was partly ecclesiastical and partly Marxist," Mailer said.

Mailer said it showed him that the pragmatic ideals of Christianity might be compatible with socialism. And it gave him the impetus for playing up Jesus's "powerful, radical spirit" in the novel as the Nazarene ousts the money-changers from the temple and spars with religious leaders.

Said Mailer: "When I began writing this book, I said, 'I'm going to hew to the story as long as I possibly can but . . . finally I'm not writing the book to make a pious contribution to the state of affairs. I'm writing this book to express something I feel deeply.'"

Those ideas have to do with a money-driven society protected by laws—the forces behind the men who angered Jesus and were most angered by him, the Pharisees.

"The entire money culture we live in is populated by Pharisees," whom Mailer describes as those "interested first in money, in wealth, and secondarily who feel a little guilty, a little uneasy about spending their lives acquiring money" and therefore "observe all the laws in order to have a safety net over themselves in case they are making a mistake."

Socialism, underscored with Christian faith, could be an answer to many societal problems, especially homelessness and poverty, Mailer said.

"Capitalism is the work of the Devil," he said.

And Satan gets grand attention in "Gospel According to the Son." He's handsome, he's smart, he's shrewd, and he wields as much power in the world as God. That's why Jesus dies on the cross, Mailer said.

"I have never believed in the notion that God just let him get up there and suffer, to no point," Mailer said. "I cannot comprehend it in human terms, certainly, but it's beyond me in divine terms."

He believes it's a ruse that the Crucifixion was part of God's plan. God was smart enough to counter the Crucifixion with the doctrine of salvation, he said. But he calls

Jesus's death God's "one great failure" in the biblical story, as the Holocaust is God's great failure in human history. God is all-good but not all-powerful, but he also "is doing his or her best," he said.

Mailer speculated that there just might be a "higher god" above the biblical God and Satan. "God and the Devil have warring notions of the human vision. Each has a vision for humanity. So the upper god says, 'All right, you two should go down there and fight it out.'"

Mailer's goal as a writer was to explore the humanity of the Son of God. So he plotted Jesus's "life line" as closely as he could, eliminating conflicting elements but leaving relatively intact the teachings and miracles—the raising of Lazarus, the walk on water, the healings of the blind and leprous, the casting out of demons.

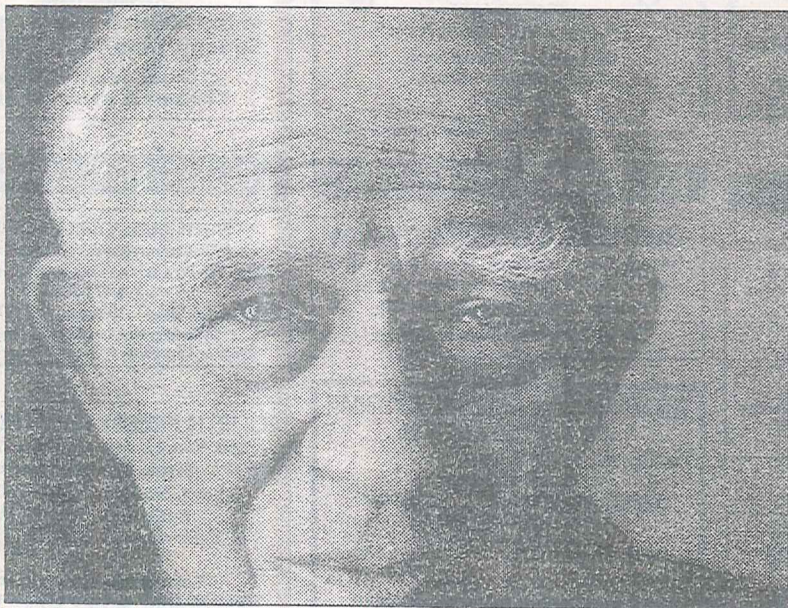
But Jesus-Mailer tones down the miracles, telling how his early biographers "exaggerated" his abilities and how each miracle drained energy from him. He also feels remorse for rejecting his family (the "Who is my mother, who is my brethren?" scene in Mark) and for withering the fig tree when it bore no fruit for him. He carries a load of guilt for the babies killed by Herod's men when they were trying to kill Jesus. And he has lustful thoughts about the beautiful adulteress he saves from being stoned (Mailer wrongly calls her Mary Magdalene).

Today, emphasizing Jesus's role as Savior "is not necessary and may be counterproductive," keeping people from "facing reality," Mailer said. In the eternal battle between Good and Evil, wanting to be "saved" is selfish, a cop-out, he said. "My idea is that we are there to help God and God is there to help us, and that it's a vital collaboration."

Reincarnation makes more sense. "Souls are continually reborn and presumably get better or worse," he said.

Over the course of a long conversation, the meanderings of Mailer's spirited, peripatetic intellect—the genesis of "Gospel"—begin to make sense. And despite critical disdain for it, Mailer seems pleased with his book.

Jesus "is at the center of the American ethic," the author said. "And if he's going to be our religious leader, and I say 'our'—even though I'm not a Christian—it seemed to me maybe I'd perform a very small patriotic service by making him slightly more available."



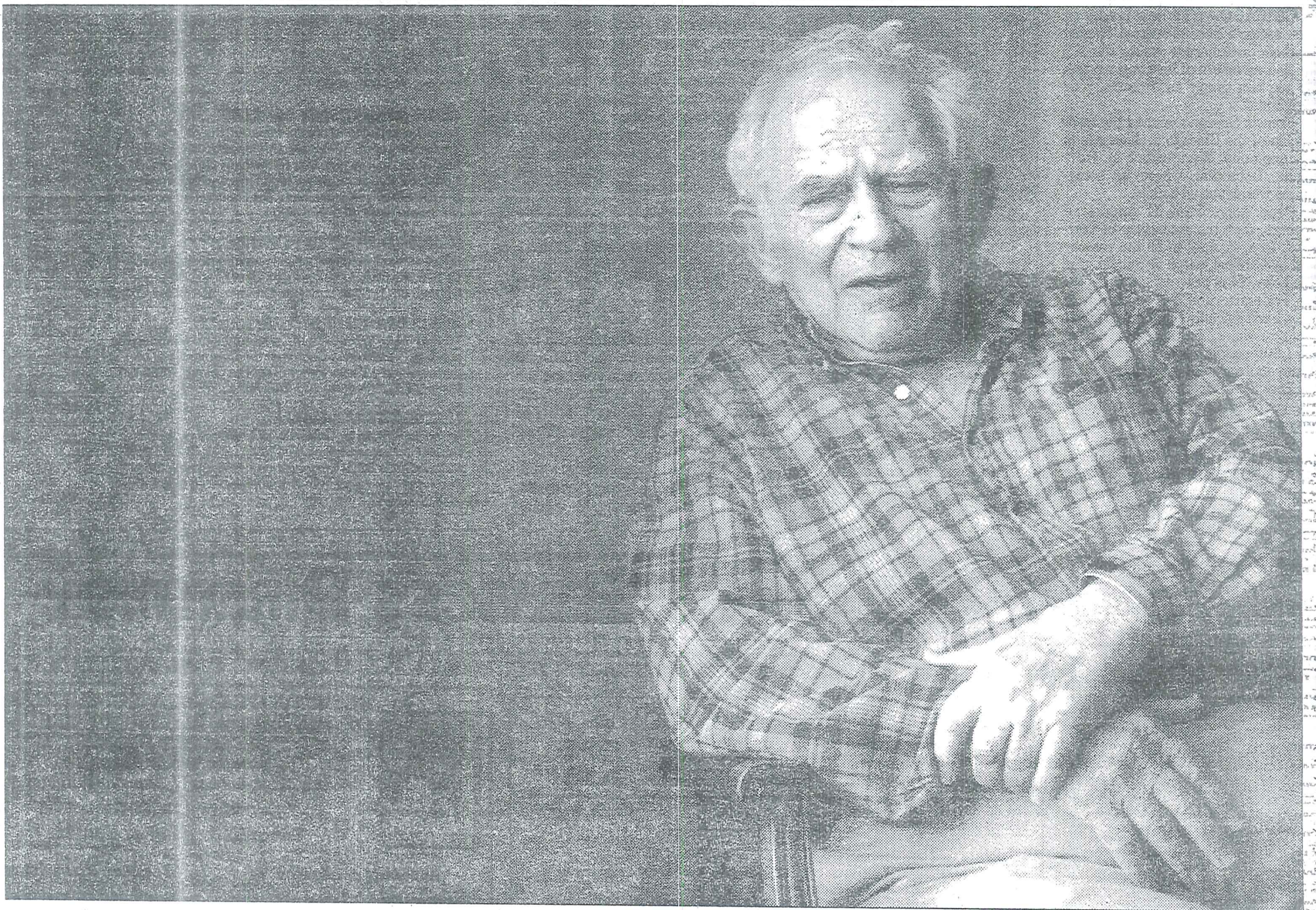
## INSPIRATION

**T**he nearest I ever felt God came to me was at a certain point in my life when I was very troubled and I was prowling the streets deep in Brooklyn. I've always been very, very careful about paying for things, doing everything properly in strange places. Suddenly there was this voice in my ear: Buy this coffee and doughnuts. Now walk out of the store and don't pay for it. There was no question in my mind that this was God speaking to me and what he was trying to say was: 'Toughen up, boy. Learn to breathe.' It's the only time I ever cheated anyone.

"Sometimes you write a book where something passes through you, as if you're the agent for something else. For instance, the book of mine 'Why Are We in Vietnam?' [1967] — I feel like I had nothing to do with it. I just showed up every day for work. It came to me in two months, three months, very quickly. Some people say it may be my best, certainly my funniest book. ...

"'The Executioner's Song' [1979, about the life of convicted killer Gary Gilmore] was nothing but work. I felt like a coal miner. I spent two years working 10 hours a day, six and seven days a week, because there was so much material. ... It didn't call for inspiration. It called for being true to these interviews we'd done."

—NORMAN MAILER, at the interview



Norman Mailer, a Jew, on his retelling of Christian history: "I'm not writing the book to make a pious contribution to the state of affairs. I'm writing this book to express something I feel deeply." PHOTOS BY NANCY ANDREWS—THE WASHINGTON POST

# Mailer and the Not-So-Good News Post 4/27/97

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE SON

By Norman Mailer  
Random House. 242 pp. \$22

By Steven Moore

**M**ARILYN MONROE, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore, Lee Harvey Oswald, Pablo Picasso—Norman Mailer is interested in celebrities, or more precisely, in the cultural implications of celebrity and notoriety. In his newest book, he takes on the greatest celebrity of Western civilization, Jesus Christ superstar.

Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's musical was innovative, entertaining and theologically provocative. Mailer's book is none of these things; it is a poorly conceived disaster, easily the worst book the man's ever writ-

*Steven Moore has written many books and essays on modern fiction.*

ten. I don't like writing negative reviews, nor am I a Mailer-basher—*Why Are We in Vietnam?* and *The Armies of the Night* are two of the best books about the '60s, when Mailer was in his element—but this new one leaves me no choice. It's that bad.

*The Gospel According to the Son* purports to be Jesus' autobiography. Unsatisfied with the exaggerated accounts given in the gospels and apocrypha, which he has read, Jesus decides to tell his own story. But what follows is basically the synoptic gospels retold in the first person, with a few details borrowed from John. Mailer's version reads like a simplified novelization for grade-school children, or for

adults who find the New Testament tough going, even in one of those breezy new translations in a rainbow cover. No attempt was made to flesh out the gospels' bare-boned account with local color or historical background, and the other characters remain as one-dimensional as in the original.

Mailer doesn't seem to realize there's a difference between the Jesus of history, a Jewish soothsayer, and the Jesus of the gospels, a mythological figure. Everyone who has written a serious novel about Jesus has tried to recover or imagine what Jesus' actual life might have been like; Mailer just paraphrases the gospels, uncritically accepting the inven-

tions of the anonymous group of storytellers, witnesses, scribes, local pastors, budding theologians and translators who are responsible for the textual mess we now have. Consequently, Mailer's Jesus tells of his family's escape to Egypt when he was a child, though the trip is clearly an invention by later writers who wanted to enforce Jesus' messiah status by having him seem to fulfill the Old Testament (at the top of Matthew's agenda especially). Later Jesus retells the story of Salome's striptease for the head of John the Baptist, a story that was denounced 40 years ago by Robert Graves and Joshua Podro (in their fascinating *Nazarene Gospel Restored*) as historically absurd and at odds with social customs at the time, as unthinkable as Chelsea Clinton performing the Dance of the Seven Veils at one of her father's political functions. It has been estimated that as much as 82 percent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the gospels were not actually spoken by him, but Mailer has him reciting most of them nonethe- —Continued on page 2

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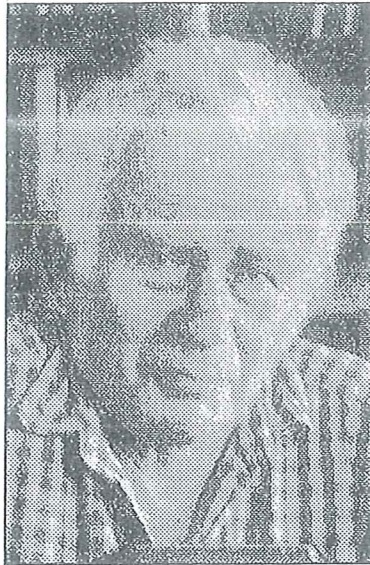
# The Gospel According to Jesus

Continued from page 1

less. All this makes nonsense of Jesus' claim at the beginning of Mailer's novel that he'll be telling the true story, free of the gospels' additions and exaggerations.

What little Mailer does add to the gospels is of questionable value. He makes Jesus and his family Essenes, a notion discredited by most scholars. He accuses God of being sexist and adds homosexuals to Jesus' earliest followers, both defensible but smacking of political correctness, which I would have thought beneath Mailer. He gives some extra dialogue to Judas, which does no harm, but he spoils Pontius Pilate's famously laconic "What is truth?" by having the Roman governor expand upon his remark. (Later Mailer violates his first-person point of view by recording Pilate's inner conflicts.) Mailer's is an eschatological Jesus, predicting the end of the world within his followers' lifetime, another position discredited by contemporary theologians and one flatly at odds with actual history and even with the conclusion of Mailer's novel.

The only controversial element Mailer introduces is Jesus' doubts about his father's omnipotence, an idea first suggested to him by the Devil during the temptation scene in the Wilderness, and which dogs him throughout the novel. On the cross, fearing his father has abandoned him, Jesus gives Pop the



BY CORI WELLS BRAUN

Norman Mailer

benefit of the doubt: "My Father was only doing what He could do. Even as I had done what I could. So He was Truly my Father. Like all Fathers He had many sore troubles, and some had little to do with His son. Had His efforts for me been so great that now He was exhausted?" In the final chapter, apparently set in Heaven in our own time, Jesus notes that his overworked father is still a bit distant: "My Father, however, does not often speak to me. Nonetheless, I honor Him. Surely He sends forth as much love as He can offer, but His love is not without limit. . . . Thereby does my Father still find much purpose for

me. It is even by way of my blessing that the Lord sends what love He can muster down to that creature who is man and that other creature who is woman, and I try to remain the source of love that is tender." Even as an atheist I'm embarrassed for Jesus to have to mouth such drivel.

As this extract shows, the style is modeled on the King James translation (which Jesus quotes from time to time), another bad choice on Mailer's part. The gospels were written in the vernacular, not in an archaic (albeit sonorous) literary language. If Jesus is telling his own story, why would he imitate a 17th-century preacher? Only pious Christians believe the gospels should be rendered in an antique style, complete with capitals for He and Father. Mailer's choice is mystifying. (For an English translation that is faithful to the original, pick up one of the two books produced by the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar: *The Complete Gospels* or *The Five Gospels*, both in paperback from HarperCollins.)

*The Gospel According to the Son* may make a suitable Sunday school prize, but I can't imagine anyone with more than a high-school education finding this book of interest. For Mailer's detractors, it will be one more nail in the coffin of his declining reputation. His wife, friends, or agent—all thanked in the acknowledgments—should have prevented him from making a fool of himself in public like this. ■

P. 150 - 6/28/97

# Ancient Evenings

## THE LAST PARTY Scenes from My Life With Norman Mailer

By Adele Mailer  
Barricade. 380 pp. \$25

By Bruce Cook

IT'S DIFFICULT to know quite how to approach a book like this. When an ex-wife, ex-mistress, sometimes even a widow, writes a book about her former partner, it is often done to give vent to stored anger; Claire Bloom provided a prime example recently in her report on her married life with Philip Roth. Occasionally, however, there are surprises. When Joyce Johnson, an ex-girlfriend of Jack Kerouac, published *Minor Characters*, nobody expected much—I at least did not. What we got was a beautifully written piece of work that is wonderfully evocative of Kerouac and the entire period.

*The Last Party* does not begin to approach the standard set by *Minor Characters*. Joyce Johnson had at least a novel or two behind her and years of experience as a book editor when she wrote her memoir. Adele Mailer is, or was, a painter and an actress. Evidently the only writing she had done previously was of a one-woman show about her family which she expanded to in-

*Bruce Cook is the author of a number of books, the first of which was "The Beat Generation."*



BETTMANN ARCHIVES PHOTO REPRINTED FROM "THE LAST PARTY"

### Adele and Norman Mailer just before their separation and divorce

clude her life with Norman Mailer from 1951 to 1962; the book at hand evolved from it.

Her years with Mailer were tough ones for him, professionally. When they met he was coming off his failed first marriage, yet still riding high on the huge success of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*. His second novel, *Barbary Shore*, was trounced by the critics when it came out in 1952. His third, *The Deer Park*, was rejected by the publisher who had contracted for it when Mailer refused to rewrite or remove a passage deemed pornographic; when at last it was brought out by a more daring publisher in 1955, it received more bad reviews than good. He would not attempt another full-length work of fiction for 10 years. How did Mailer, the man, hold up during these difficulties? That is the subject of this book, and

the answer is, alas, not at all well.

Right from the beginning, according to Adele Mailer, he wanted, then needed, to be the center of attention, admired for his talent and bold ideas. That meant an endless routine of party-going—invitations were always forthcoming—and party-giving, which in turn meant lots of drinking (often with disastrous results detailed in the book) and lots of pot-smoking, too (with even more disastrous results). Back in the '50s, Norman and Adele Mailer were out there on the very cutting edge of being naughty. They stripped at parties, tried wife-swapping—though Norman didn't like it much when he would look over and find Adele in the arms of another man—even paid to be entertained with a sexual exhibition down in Mexico.

She seems to have matched him drink

for drink and toke for toke at those parties. Indeed, though she clearly blames her husband for it, she is quite frank about her own downfall. Never once, she says, did it occur to her that she might be an alcoholic; now, presumably, it has occurred to her, and she has done something about it.

Naughtiness turned nasty. Mailer became famously and openly unfaithful. His truculence escalated sharply to combativeness: He got into frequent fist fights and foolishly resisted arrest on one occasion and had his head bloodied for his trouble. When Adele was pregnant with their second child, he hit her in the stomach. All this culminated in the infamous stabbing incident. At the end of one of their parties, a drunken Mailer returned, bloody and with a black eye, from an excursion into the streets and stabbed her twice with a three-inch penknife. She was on the critical list three weeks; he was taken to Bellevue and diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic; she refused to keep him there or to press charges. And that, except for a few brief months when she returned to him, naively believing that things would be better, was the end of their marriage.

Although I accept Adele Mailer's account of their life together as accurate, something needs to be said at this point. No matter how drunk the night before, nor whether he had got the worst of it in last night's brawl, Mailer always went off next morning to write and would usually work up to seven hours. If, during their years together, Mailer's career as a novelist was interrupted, he recreated himself brilliantly as the essayist and journalist of the '60s and '70s. Does this excuse his behavior toward his wife and others? No, it does not. But it should remind us that the only true way to judge a writer is by his work, and not by his private life—even when his private life is made public. ■

Mr. Stephen S. Rosenfeld, editorial  
The Washington Post  
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Harold Weisberg  
7627 Old Receiver Rd.  
Frederick, MD 21702  
3/11/97

Dear Mr. Rosenfeld,

A friend teaching this semester in a London university sends me clippings two of which I enclose. Our copier will not pick up the headline on the Lab story from the London Observer of 2/16. It is "FBI in tainted evidence scandal." I send it because I do not recall seeing some of it in the Post. It also underscores what I've been saying is the potential of this scandal. Mailer's mind-reading from the grave got him high marks in the Post for his disaster that was more Oswald Stale than it was Oswald's Tale.

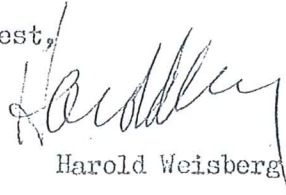
In recent years I've been using the time that remains to me making what record I can for our history. On the Mailer trash I have a rather long manuscript because I admitted, with the official evidence, what he played games with. However, I did not tell him I was writing about his fiasco. He had no way of which I know of knowing and I have no reason to believe that he knew.

He had agreed to speak to the convention of the Coalition on Political Assassinations. Then he learned that I would be given some kind of honor. So, he canceled. He told them he would not appear where I would be. Even when he was told I'd not be there he chickened out and did not appear.

He is not as tough as he pretends to be.

He must owe Random House quite a bit for them to publish him after the loss on his pathetic assassination fantasy.

Best,



Harold Weisberg



# Mailer and an Almighty row

Just when you thought Norman Mailer, the gnarled, angry, elder statesman of American letters was settling for mellow retirement, he produces his most outrageous book: a first-person account of the life of Jesus Christ.

Married six times and a relentless self-publicist, Mailer has always courted controversy, whether as a bar-room brawler (he famously punched Gore Vidal at a party after, he claimed, his fellow writer had called him an "old Jew"), political radical or aggressive husband (he stabbed his second wife with a penknife).

But this time Mailer's restless quest for novelty seems to have carried him too far. "Only a megalomaniac like Mailer would have the audacity even to attempt to speak in Christ's voice," says Stuart Burrows, a writer and critic at Princeton University. "The only surprise is that Mailer has chosen to write as the Son of God, not the Almighty Himself. It's a bad business."

Although *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* will not be published until May, it has aroused the hostility of Christian fundamentalists and the evangelical Right, many of whom have denounced it as an insult and blasphemous without having read it. These are but the first skirmishes of what might become a protracted holy war, similar to that which engulfed Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a film that depicted Christ on the Cross fantasising about making love to Mary Magdalene and bringing up a family.

Random House, Mailer's American publisher, is cautious and guarded on the book; its spring catalogue simply says: "As we go to press, Norman Mailer has just given us a short novel that is certain to be one of the most extraordinary and exciting books of his exceptional career." There is a photograph of Mailer but no mention of a title or the subject of the book.

While reluctant to discuss the matter before publication, Mailer issued a pre-emptive statement: "My intent is to be neither pious nor satirical; it is, instead, to make comprehensible for myself what Fulton Oursler once called 'The

A book on Christ's life is evoking cries of blasphemy, says Jason Cowley

Greatest Story Ever Told' . . . I don't wish to arouse interest that cannot be satisfied at this point."

Mailer's long-time editor and friend Jason Epstein told

*The New York Times*: "He [Mailer] invented his version of Jesus, which seems to me to be true to the original and at the same time an original creation . . . Norman's more of

a risk-taker than most of his contemporaries. He's famous for the risks he takes. And this book should be seen as an event in his life."

In a recent interview Mailer described himself as a veteran of "emotional and spiritual wars". At the age of 73, his most bitter battle may have just begun.

Feb 24 1997

London Times p.16

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

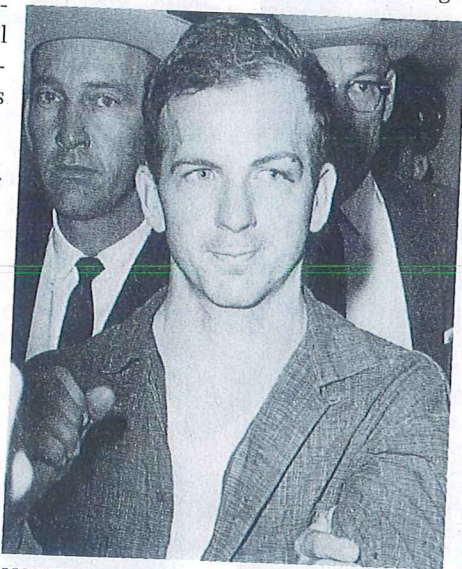
up to be President of the U.S.

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

Pat 1/17/96

## Book Duel

**T**HE BOOK publishing and distribution industries, with their tightly intertwined interests, would seem improbable combatants. But you never know. This month the American Booksellers Association sued Random House, Inc., one of the nation's largest publishing houses, for alleged unfair pricing practices that favor the big chain bookstores over the smaller independents. Random House responded by yanking its participation from the industry's convention, usually a mainstay of distribution and sales deals. Though this sounds like an inside spat, it's the symptom of a hard-fought and bitter dispute that's been gathering force in the book industry and could significantly affect what's on bookstore shelves in the next few years.

The whole matter of information and its distribution is in tremendous flux. At issue here is the fierce competition between independent bookstores, which claim credit for launching many small-audience and "serious" books, and the large national chain stores and "superstores" that increasingly dominate the market. The booksellers' association has sued five other publishers (three later settled) on the same charges as Random House—of giving the large stores special pricing breaks, allowing them to put heavier pressure on the small stores.

Though the ABA insists it is not *against* the

chains, only against special deals, resentment sometimes gets personal. Novelist Russell Banks was quoted as telling a stockholders' meeting at Barnes & Noble several months ago that the demise of independent bookstores was inevitable and advising the chain on how it could compete better for the independents' business. Outraged small-bookstore proprietors declared that they had nurtured Mr. Banks' audience through five novels before the chains became aware of him—and that they were now pulling those novels from their shelves.

Nobody knows whether the chains, which stock in bulk, can squeeze out the independent stores on a sufficient scale to reduce their ability to sell little-promoted or little-known authors "by hand." Even if they survive, independent stores fear an uphill fight to bring in customers for specialty titles or those that may sell respectably but not excitingly over time.

These questions may sound clunky and archaic at a time when libraries are trying to go on-line, unauthorized copies of sometimes unidentified works are whizzing around the globe via e-mail, and mass electronic registries and continual catalogue sales make it possible to order a book from anywhere via 800 number. Specific disputes like this one will determine whether bookselling can preserve the traditional and less than high-tech experience of standing in a bookstore and flipping the pages of something other than a bestseller.

was devoted to a study of "The Contemporary American," examined through art, literature, philosophy, and theology. A similar curriculum was inaugurated at the university's experimental liberal arts college on the Lincoln Square campus in the fall of 1958. That school is planned to meet the needs of city students, especially "the talented poor," and in its core curriculum subjects are related not only to each other but also to the needs of the urban environment. In December 1968, however, McLaughlin had to announce that the experimental teaching method would be suspended as of June 1970 because of inadequate funds. Under another of McLaughlin's programs sixty boys are taking an accelerated three-year course at the Fordham Preparatory School followed by a three-year course at Fordham College. The curriculum at Fordham College has been reformed, with the number of courses taken each semester reduced from five to four and with a reduction in the number of philosophy and theology courses required.

The most significant changes that Father McLaughlin instituted at Fordham during his presidency moved the university toward secular control. A number of lay figures were brought in to fill key administrative positions, including Arthur Wayne Brown, as dean of the Graduate School; the former president of Hunter College, John J. Meng, as executive vice-president in charge of the Lincoln Square campus; Harry N. Rivin (former dean of teacher education at the City University of New York) as head of the School of Education; and Patricia B. Plante as dean of Thomas More College. Even more important was the transition of the board of trustees from Jesuit to lay control. When McLaughlin took office the university was owned and governed by a nine-man board of Jesuit trustees. In addition there was a thirty-two member board of lay trustees who met separately and acted in an advisory capacity. Beginning in September 1966 McLaughlin ordered the two boards to meet together, deciding issues on a majority vote. Meanwhile, the president worked to unravel the legal tangles that prevented the transfer of legal responsibility to the combined board. Finally, in December 1968, he announced that the merger had been accomplished and that Fordham would be governed by a board of trustees consisting of eleven Jesuits and fifteen laymen. The new board took office on January 21, 1969 making Fordham University the first of the twenty-eight Jesuit institutions of learning in the United States to be governed by a majority of laymen.

Despite the changes and reforms that McLaughlin inaugurated many students and faculty members were dissatisfied. In early December of 1968 a student-faculty coalition sponsored two days of demonstrations and meetings on the Bronx campus, charging Fordham with a number of failings, including "institutional racism," poor financial management, and autocratic administration policies. "Rarely in its history have so many Fordham faculty and students been so involved in discussing Fordham's role as a university," McLaughlin declared at a news conference. "Since the Student-Faculty Coalition for a Restructured University has been the catalyst in bringing about these dis-

ussions, I am grateful to the coalition." The Fordham president acknowledged that the university "did not do its share in educating the underprivileged—at least the blacks and Puerto Ricans," and asserted that he supports "any and all attempts to end whatever 'institutional racism' may exist at Fordham." As for the other charges, Father McLaughlin said that major reforms would have to be supported by the entire university body, and not by just a small minority of protesters.

On January 1, 1969 Father McLaughlin became chancellor of Fordham, chiefly a money-raising post. For the first time in Fordham's history the Vatican was not consulted on the choice of his successor, Father Michael F. Walsh, former president of Boston College. McLaughlin took up his new duties at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina in September 1970.

In his 1967 article on Fordham for the *Saturday Review* James Cass described McLaughlin as "a vigorous, intense, and imaginative man who laughs easily," adding, "He lacks the smooth public manner of many college presidents, but radiates a sense of restrained personal warmth." Leo McLaughlin is blue-eyed and gray-haired. He weighs 190 pounds and is six feet tall. His hobby is photography. During 1968 and 1969 he was president of the Association of Urban Universities, and he serves on the advisory council of the Association of Governing Boards and on the advisory committee of the General Command and Staff School at Fort Leavenworth. He is a member of the University Club of New York City. The former Fordham president's philosophy is perhaps best summed up in one of his favorite sayings: "New ideas, new ideas, that's all that counts in today's world, new ideas, and so few people have them."

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#### MAILER, NORMAN

Jan. 31, 1923- Author  
Address: b. c/o Scott Meredith, Inc., 580 5th Ave., New York 10036

NOTE: This biography supersedes the article that appeared in *Current Biography* in 1948.

Mettle-some author and public personality Norman Mailer, who has a penchant for prize-fighting metaphors, would like nothing better than to be known as "the Champ" of American letters, and many in the literary establishment are willing to concede him that title. Mailer, who became famous in 1948 with his best-selling realistic World War II novel *The Naked and the Dead*, has in recent years turned his enormous maverick talent—especially for evoking ambience through concrete visceral images—into political journalism and personal essays filled

with his dazzling insights. His *Armies of the Night*, a personal account of the four-day antiwar protest in Washington, D.C. in 1967—during which he was arrested—won Pulitzer, Polk, and National Book awards for 1968. Reviewing the book in the *New York Times* (May 5, 1968), Alfred Kazin wrote: "Only a born novelist could have written a piece of history so intelligent, mischievous, penetrating, and alive, so vivid with crowds, the great stage of American democracy."

Probably the best capsule biography and personality portrait of Mailer was written—in the third person—by the author himself in *Armies of the Night*: "[The] warrior, presumptive general, ex-political candidate, embattled aging enfant terrible of the literary world, wise father of six children, radical intellectual, existential philosopher, hard-working author, champion of obscenity, husband of four battling sweet wives, amiable bar drinker, and much exaggerated street fighter, party giver, hostess insulter . . . had . . . a fatal taint, a last remaining speck of the one personality he found absolutely insupportable—the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn."

Norman Mailer was born in Long Branch, New Jersey on January 31, 1923 to Isaac Barnett Mailer, a struggling accountant who had emigrated from South Africa by way of England, and Fanny (Schneider) Mailer. He has a sister, Mrs. Barbara Alson, who has at times served as his secretary. His father, who still works as an accountant, and his mother, who runs the Miss Baltimore Agency for housekeepers and nurses, now live near him in the Brooklyn Heights section of Brooklyn.

The Mailers moved from New Jersey to the Eastern Parkway section of Brooklyn when Norman was four. In Brooklyn, he compiled an excellent scholastic record at P.S. 161 and Boys High School. Chiefly interested in aeronautics during his school years, he spent most of his leisure time building model airplanes, and he looked forward to becoming an aeronautical engineer. At nine he filed two notebooks with a story called "An Invasion of Mars," but that was written, a chapter a day, at the suggestion of his mother. He did not become seriously interested in writing until late 1939, when he was a sixteen-year-old freshman engineering major at Harvard University. During the following year he wrote a score of short stories, one of which, "The Greatest Thing in the World," won *Story* magazine's college contest for 1941. During the summer of 1942 he worked at a state mental hospital in Boston. Out of that experience came a novel, "A Transit to Narcissus," which was, by his own description, "romantic, morbid, twisted, and heavily tortured." It was never published.

After taking his degree in engineering at Harvard, in 1943, Mailer was inducted into the United States Army. He served as an infantryman in the Philippines until the end of World War II, and then as a member of the United States occupation forces in Japan. Francis Irby Gwaltney, a novelist who served with Mailer in the Philippines, has recalled: "Back then 'scrawny' was the best word for him. He was very gentle, shy, quiet, not at all aggressive. It must be a burden to him to be aggressive." In an interview with Brock Brower for *Life* (September 24, 1965), Gwaltney testified that



NORMAN MAILER

Mailer was as reckless of risk then as he is now: "He was a brave soldier, but not a good one. It's a miracle Mailer lived through the war."

Discharged from the United States Army in May 1946, Mailer resettled in New York City and embarked on the writing of a novel based on his war experience. In fifteen months he finished *The Naked and the Dead* (Rinehart, 1948), a massive book with echoes of Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and James T. Farrell. As Brock Brower noted in his *Life* article, the novel "made the GI a kind of holy figure and the GI's mother tongue [including obscenities] a new vulgate in American letters." *The Naked and the Dead* enjoyed immediate critical acclaim and general popularity and sold 197,185 copies during its first year after publication.

In the late 1940's Mailer, always torn between anarchism and socialism, went through a political crisis of conscience, flirting with the Communist-infiltrated Progressive party until his French-born left-wing friend and ideological mentor Jean Malacanis dissuaded him. From the *cul-de-sac* of anti-Stalinist Marxism he wrote *Barbary Shore* (Rinehart, 1951), a murky, agonized exorcism of his disillusionment with Communism and his sadness over the trend to authoritarian government in the United States. In that novel Mailer pitted an ex-Communist with a sense of loyalty and a set of ideals against an F.B.I. agent capable of any betrayal in the course of his work. The book received, as Mailer himself later observed, "possibly the worst reviews of any serious novel in recent years."

*Barbary Shore* was begun in Hollywood, where Mailer put in a brief, unhappy stint as a script writer, and finished in rural retreat in Putney, Vermont. In 1951 Mailer left his first wife and moved to Greenwich Village in New York City, where he helped to found the weekly newspaper the *Village Voice* (in which he still owns a 15 percent interest). For two years he wrote columns for the *Voice* in which he expounded his philosophy of "Hip," or "American existentialism." His definitive essay on the subject was "The White Negro," in which he defined the "hipster" as "the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with in-

stant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as *l'univers concentrationnaire*, or with a slow death by conformity, with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled, . . . 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 into the rebellious imperatives of the self."

Mailer spent four years writing and rewriting his third published novel, *The Deer Park* (Putnam, 1955), a pansexual story set in Hollywood. According to James Toback in *Esquire* (December 1968), Eitel, the disgraced movie director who is the "hip" hero of the novel, "gave eloquent expression to the psychopathic extremes—both sexual and political—of Mailer's own personality," and Brock Brower in his *Life* article asserted that "the turbulent love affair between Elena, the transient *amorosa*, and Eitel . . . was only a thin veil for his [Mailer's] own drifting marriage to Adele [his second wife]."

Careful readers and sympathetic critics have generally recognized *The Deer Park* to be Mailer's best novel, but reviewers gave it short shrift when it was published. Mailer, who had expected the book to prove to doubters in the literary establishment that he was still very much alive creatively, was at first demoralized by the tepid response. Then, he has recounted, as quoted by Raymond A. Sokoiov in *Newsweek* (December 9, 1968), he came to the conclusion, that "We are not inferior. . . . They are killing us . . . because they don't know what they're doing. . . . Suddenly I became very complex. I had mad ideas, I believed in orgies. . . . Once you've decided nobody knows how to run the machine, you suddenly see yourself running it. And then you become very curious about yourself. You start making all sorts of experiments."

After interviewing *Village Voice* associates and others who knew Mailer in the middle and late 1950's, Brock Brower wrote in *Life*: "The novelist in him began to manipulate real people instead of fictional characters—and especially Adele—to fit the new moral schema that preoccupied him more and more. . . . The worst distortions . . . took place as he moved out with her to the pot scene and the sexual anomy of mere orgiastic linkage. He was living up to the code that the worst violation of life is to play it safe, but he was also slipping into a profound depression down the slide area of seasonal." That phase of Mailer's life came to a crashing dénouement on November 19, 1960, when, at the end of an all-night party at his Manhattan apartment, he stabbed his wife with a penknife, seriously wounding her. Mailer was arrested and received a suspended sentence when Adele—who recovered fully from her wounds—refused to press charges. The author apparently emerged from the experience a chastened man. "It's as if he really let go of something," his sister has testified. "A great deal of the sweetness came back." As if in reference to the experience, Mailer has said, in explaining his variety of existentialism: "It suggests that man learns more about the nature of water . . . if he comes close to drowning."

Mailer's first collection of occasional pieces, strung together with confessional commentary, was

*Advertisements for Myself* (Putnam, 1959), which Bruce Cook in the *National Observer* (September 18, 1967) called "that most naked of books." In it, Mailer revealed: "I was one of the few writers of my generation who was concerned with living in Hemingway's discipline. . . . I shared with Papa the notion, arrived at slowly in my case, that even if one dulled one's talent in the punishment of becoming a man, it was more important to be a man than a very good writer, that probably I could not become a very good writer unless I learned first how to keep my nerve."

In the early 1960's Mailer wrote monthly columns for *Esquire* magazine under the heading "The Big Bite." The best known of his *Esquire* articles was "Superman Comes to Supermarket," a report on the 1960 National Democratic Convention in which he portrayed, in comic-strip strokes, John F. Kennedy as a hero comparable to Clark Kent's dashing, Herculean alter ego. Many of Mailer's magazine articles in the following three years were open letters to President Kennedy, criticizing him for not living up to his potential greatness. Those articles, along with the Convention report, were collected in *The Presidential Papers* (Putnam, 1963). James Toback in his *Esquire* article observed, "Advertisements for Myself and *The Presidential Papers*, apart from establishing Mailer as the best essayist in America, yielded explicit intimations of the author's megalomania, or, more politely, revealed that a large part of him believed he could become a hero."

Verse written by Mailer was collected in *Deaths for the Ladies, and Other Disasters* (Putnam, 1962). Some verse was also included in his book *Cannibals and Christians* (Dial, 1966), a collection otherwise made up of several short stories and many essays, including political and prize-fight reportage, interviews, polemical tracts, and a proposal for vertical city planning based on the Legoblock principle. In the commentary holding the short pieces together, Mailer explained his "vision" of "the totalitarian plague" that afflicts modern life, particularly (to his profound sadness) in the United States. The plague that he described, usually as a pervasive, corrosive "cancer," is, in its basis, spiritual, "a malfunction of inner communication between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind." But its physical manifestations are all around us, from the proliferation of actual new diseases ("as medicine presumably grows wiser") to "ugly, aesthetically emaciated buildings as the world grows ostensibly richer, . . . deteriorat[ing] workmanship as corporations improve their advertising, . . . and patriotism [turned] to carnage." "My obsession," Mailer wrote, "is not merely an obsession, I fear, but insight into the nature of things, perhaps the deepest insight I have, and this said with no innocence of the knowledge that the plague can have its home within, and these condemnations come to no more than the grapplings of a man with a curse on his flesh."

Hard-pressed for money, Mailer deliberately wrote *An American Dream* (Dial, 1965) in serial form for *Esquire* magazine, so that the pressure of monthly deadlines would prohibit him from time-consuming, perfectionist polishing. That night-

marish novel covers two wild, violent, sex-ridden days in the life of one Stephen Rojack, a war hero and former Congressman consumed by his own animality as he crosses the terrain of "magic, dread, and death." It drew a mixed response from critics, ranging from "dreadful" to "powerful" and "electric."

In his scatological, stream-of-consciousness novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (Putnam, 1967), Mailer told the story of a grizzly bear hunt in Alaska through the eyes of D.J., a young boy from Dallas, Texas who feels that "the center of things is insane with force." Many critics complained that the novel was not about Vietnam. "Not about Vietnam?" Mike McGrady asked rhetorically in *Newsday* (October 7, 1967). "It's about violence and brutality, fear and power, thwarted and misdirected sexuality, the Texas way of thinking."

Reviewers generally hailed as brilliant Mailer's highly personalized reportage on the Presidential nominating conventions of 1968, brought together in the book *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (World and New American Library, 1968), and his equally personal account of the 1967 march on the Pentagon by anti-Vietnam demonstrators, *Armies of the Night* (World and New American Library, 1968). Both books were nominated for National Book Awards, and *Armies of the Night* won the award in the arts and letters category. In the citation accompanying that award the book was called "an American epic." The same book won a George Folk Memorial Award, sponsored by the School of Journalism of Long Island University, and for it Mailer shared the Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction with Dr. René Jules Dubos, the microbiologist who was honored for his book *So Human an Animal*.

In June 1968 Mailer ran unsuccessfully in the Democratic mayoralty primary election in New York City, on a secessionist ticket proposing that the city be made the fifty-first state and that each of its neighborhoods be given city-like autonomy. He and others told the story of his campaign in *Running Against the Machine* (Doubleday, 1969). On assignment from *Life* magazine, Mailer wrote a series of articles on the United States space program that landed a man on the moon in 1969. The articles are scheduled for publication as a book by Little, Brown and Company. In 1967 Mailer produced an off-Broadway stage version of *The Deer Park*, written by himself. He has also produced three improvised films: *Wild 90* (about the Mafia), *Beyond the Law* (about the police), and *Maldstone* (about a movie director with Presidential ambitions). The casts for the films consist of Mailer, his friends, and his family.

Norman Mailer and Beverly Bentley, an actress, were married in 1963. They have two children, Michael and Stephen. Mailer was previously married to, and divorced from, Beatrice Silverman (1944-52), Adele Morales (1954-62), and Lady Jean Campbell (1962). By his first marriage he has a daughter, Susan; by his second, two daughters, Danielle and Elizabeth; and by his third, a daughter, Kate. With his present wife and children Mailer lives in a house he owns in Brooklyn Heights, overlooking the East River and providing a magnificent view of the lower Manhattan skyline. He does

his writing on the top floor of the house, in an attic room with nautical decor that is reached by a rope ladder. In public he usually dresses with old-fashioned nattiness, but in private he prefers informal clothes, such as cut-off dungarees.

Physically, Mailer is a chunky man, five feet eight inches tall, with brilliant, wild blue eyes and a shock of curly brown hair that is graying. Near-sighted, he wears spectacles when he is writing or reading. Full of restless energy, he speaks with a clipped delivery, spurring out streams of words—and with them, often, spontaneous, brilliant insights—in machine-gun fashion. His emulation of prize fighters (such as his friend, José Torres) is evident in his rolling, shuffling gait, in the boxer's crouch he likes to affect, and in his pastimes of shadow boxing and arm wrestling with his hard-drinking cronies. Many who know him have testified that, although his belligerent stance can be "frightening," he "radiates warmth." "He is actually a very sweet man," Brock Brower wrote in *Life*, "often gentle, always generous." Politically, Mailer—who characterizes President Nixon as a "tranquillizer"—now classifies himself as "left conservative." More generally, he likes to think of himself as "a slightly punch-drunk . . . fighter."

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#### MALIK, ADAM

July 22, 1917- Foreign Minister of the Republic of Indonesia  
Address: Dij, Diponegoro 17, Djakarta, Indonesia

The chief architect of Indonesia's foreign policy in the period that marked the eclipse of the late President Sukarno, Adam Malik has concentrated his efforts on making his country of some 112,800,000 people a respected member of the family of nations. A militant nationalist in his youth, Malik took part in the struggle that led to the independence of Indonesia from Dutch colonial rule after World War II. He became one of the key members of the government of General Suharto, who took over effective control of Indonesia from Sukarno following an abortive Communist coup attempt in the fall of 1965. Since taking charge of the Foreign Affairs Ministry in March 1966, Malik has sought to reverse Sukarno's pro-Chinese policy, and he has scored a number of diplomatic achievements, including the ending of the hostile confrontation with Malaysia, the re-

Dear Herman,

4/26/75

Send a copy of Howard Goodman's report in the Philadelphia Inquirer of your four days edifying history majors at Penn, I was taken by what ~~you~~<sup>he</sup> quotes you ~~of as~~ saying about <sup>in</sup> Oswald's Tale:

"Hiller said he decided 'it was likely' that Oswald acted alone in killing President ~~Kennedy~~ John F. Kennedy - not from the evidence, (which is impenetrable', but because I got to know his character."

When we met at Georgetown University in 1973 I offered you access to all the many pages of FBI records I had. You said you'd be in touch. But you were not.

I could not very well ship you thousands of pages nor could I copy them and send you all those copies.

Some of it as well as some of the more recent FBI and other records I've gotten are used in my NEVER AGAIN!

So, I'm asking Herman Graf to send you a copy so you can decide for yourself whether if one does not have two Pulitzers can find it other than "impenetrable" you also might.

Sincerely,



Harold Weisberg

Harold Weisberg  
7627 Old Receiver Rd.  
Frederick, MD 21702



Norman Mailer  
142 Columbia Heights, Doorbell 4  
Brooklyn, NY 11201

5/1/95

Harold Welsberg  
7627 Old Receiver Rd.  
Frederick, MD 21702

Dear Norman,

You may remember that we met at the Georgetown University gathering Bud Fensterwald arranged, that I then offered you access to all the JFK assassination record I'd gotten from the government (you said you'd give it some thought) and that you were impressed by something in Oscar filed in one of those many FOIA lawsuits he filed for me.

(Please excuse my typing. What <sup>my age</sup> ~~is~~ and medical problems do not account for that the typewriter can no longer be repaired locally does. I'm 82 now.)

Joseph Pinder's review of your book in Book World praises you for your extensive use of the published Warren Commission materials. When I first saw your notes, appreciations and bibliography I came to believe that you had been given the research of some ~~one~~ because I know the amount of work and time required to master that material. I do not suggest you were lazy. Rather that it seemed you just did not have that time, even with an excellent ~~an~~ assistant, with all else you had to do.

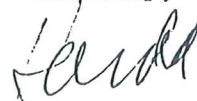
Of those you think (xxi), and I'm quite familiar with the work of most of them, Jean Davison, whose book is not included in your notes, seems most likely. This belief seems to be supported by what you used of what she used. Also, she made no use of disclosed records, as you do not, while when the Posners were here Gerald spent three days selecting documents of which he wanted copies and Trisha copied hundreds of them.

Epstein got a tax break when he deposited his records at Boston College but the conditions were such several years ago when I sought access to them it was denied.

That your bibliography does not include works disagreeing with the Warren report also took my attention. If you'd be kind enough to tell me why, I'd like to know.

If you have Harry Schiller's address I'd like to write him. Haven't seen him since he took me to lunch in L.A. just before Wyas in 1966.

Sincerely,

  
Harold Welsberg

EDITORIAL PAGE  
UES 9-7-93  
PHILA POSNER

WORK B...

# The magic bullet

## *Specter may have been right all along*

It sometimes seems as if Sen. Arlen Specter has two opinions on every subject. But for nearly 30 years, Specter has single-mindedly stuck to his guns on the "single-bullet theory," of which he is the author.

As a junior counsel on the Warren Commission investigating the Nov. 22, 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Specter devised the notion that a single bullet ripped through Kennedy's back as he rode in the presidential limousine through Dallas, exited, struck Texas Gov. John Connally in the shoulder as he rode in the seat in front, shattered his fifth right rib, exited, struck Connally in the wrist, exited, and struck the governor in his left thigh, breaking the skin.

Now that's a lot of damage for a single bullet to wreak, and so it's come to be known as the "magic bullet." Conspiracy buffs say multiple bullets did all that damage, and

that means Lee Harvey Oswald couldn't have acted alone, as the Warren Commission concluded.

"One of the grossest lies ever foisted on the American people," Kevin Costner's character calls the theory in the recent film *JFK*. Our own columnist, Steve Lopez, said he demonstrated the magic bullet's path to his sons this way: "I got a running start and dived through the back of a car, emerged out a side window, hovered, entered another car, and landed in the driver's seat unscathed."

Specter may have the last laugh, bitter though it may be. An impressive new book, *Case Closed* by lawyer Gerald Posner, supports him. Posner commissioned a firm that specializes in computerized reconstructions for use in litigation to conduct elaborate tests. It confirmed the theory. "For those seeking the truth about the assassination, the facts ... are incontrovertible," writes Posner.

# BOOK NEWS

EDITOR: SUZANNE MANTELL

## Assassination Anniversary Marked by 'Definitive' Works

Several big books purport to answer the question, Who killed JFK? Unfortunately, their findings conflict

BY ROBERT DAHLIN

The very same images from Dallas that prove to one man's satisfaction that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing President Kennedy 30 years ago this November lead, another to conclude with confidence that a hideous conspiracy destroyed him.

Such starkly conflicting views will collide in bookstores this fall from, among other houses, Random House and Viking. Though wave after wave of books on the assassination have appeared in the years since President Kennedy's death, it is noteworthy that this season brings books from large houses that can afford lavish productions and promotion, which has not been the case with most of the earlier books on the subject.

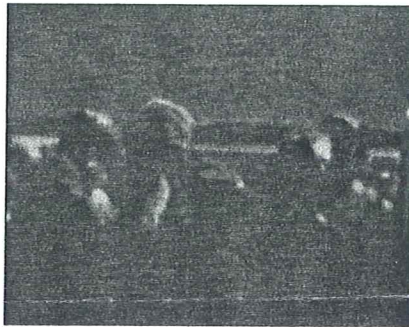
### The Lone Assassin

Random's *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* by Gerald L. Posner (Oct., \$25, with 16 pages of black-and-white photos) takes what has come to be the more controversial position—the single gunman theory, which holds that Oswald acted alone. This is the official position of the Warren Commission, about which Posner is otherwise critical. To reach his conclusion, which the publisher says answers all lingering questions about the assassination, Posner, a lawyer and author, reexamined the case, conducted dozens of new interviews and viewed computer and laser enhancements of the eyewitness Zapruder film. Posner was unavailable for comment at this writing.

Random House vice-president and executive editor Bob Loomis is reluctant to reveal much of the book's contents: It's too early, he says. "We commissioned this book a couple of years ago," he explains. "At the heart of it is a biography of Lee Harvey Oswald

that confronts various conspiracy theories as it goes along. Posner takes up separate episodes as they occur in history—episodes in Oswald's life, in [Jack] Ruby's life—making a chronological scenario in which we see how it all fits together."

Loomis says Posner has followed leads that no one else has, receiving new cooperation from Marina Oswald,



The new wave of books reexamining JFK's assassination mix old evidence and new technology. Here, "enhanced" frames from the Zapruder film.

the autopsy doctors, Oswald's friends and others. "All the conspiracy theories have undermined the public's belief in the government," Loomis says. "They believe that everybody's in cahoots, that we have murderers in the CIA. That's what has been accepted, and that, to me, is a crime."

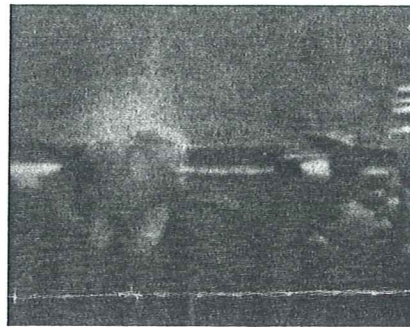
Because Posner steadfastly rejects the conspiracy theories in a heavily footnoted argument, Loomis expects the book to arouse controversy. "It's not that the people who have written otherwise are frauds," he contends, "but there is almost a religious fervor out there about conspiracies that is impervious to contrary evidence." A 50,000-copy first printing is planned, with author tour, advertising and an *At Random* feature. First serial rights have been picked up by *U.S. News & World Report*.

### Photos Prove Conspiracy

Just as Posner sees the Zapruder film as confirmation of the lone assassin theory, Robert J. Groden sees it as proving exactly the opposite. There was a conspiracy, he asserts. *The Killing of a President: The Complete Photographic Record of the JFK Assassination, the Conspiracy and the*

*Cover-Up* (Viking Studio, Nov., \$30) uses computer technology to uncover new details and provides hitherto expurgated transcripts—including that of Jacqueline Kennedy's testimony before the Warren Commission, which is shown to have been originally edited for public consumption. Groden, who has been a student of the assassination since it occurred, was staff photographic consultant to the House Select Committee on Assassinations, as well as technical advisor to Oliver Stone on his film *JFK*. Groden was also unavailable for comment.

Speaking for him, Michael Frag-



From Viking's *The Killing of a President*

nito, editorial director of Viking Studio Books, says *The Killing of the President* is the only book to be entirely comprehensive in the sheer number and quality of photographic evidence. "There will be more than 650 photographs in color and quadra-tone," he says, "and a four-color separation of black-and-white photos for maximum clarity. More than 100 of the photographs here have never been published before." Among these are previously suppressed color photos of the autopsy on JFK's body that record bullet entries, and a restoration of the damaged frames of the Zapruder film.

Groden also reportedly uncovered new details in photos already available. "Some of the photographs taken right after the shots were fired show people running toward the grassy knoll [behind], where they saw a puff of smoke," Fragnito says. "Robert makes it very clear that the shot that killed Kennedy came from the front, and if that is true, a conspiracy certainly did occur."

"Robert calls this a howdunit, not a whodunit," continues Fragnito. "He's not one of those wacko assassination buffs. His point is that a conspiracy occurred, but he doesn't claim to know

## Out of the Past, in Spanish and English



© 1998 Red Grooms/ARS, New York

A bilingual record of American history with pictures that illustrate major themes in the country's life and bloodstream is the concept behind American Highlights/Los Estados Unidos: United States History in Notable Works of Art/Grandes Momentos en su Historia a Través de Prominentes Obras de Arte, by Edith Pavese, published this month by Abrams (\$29.95). All of the text appears in both English and Spanish. Shown here: Red Grooms's wood construction Somewhere in Beverly Hills algún lugar de Beverly Hills (1966-67). Abrams plans to direct the book largely to the educational market, and to follow up with Japanese, French, German and Russian in place of the Spanish.

who the participants were." Viking plans a 100,000-copy first printing, national publicity campaign and satellite tour, and is looking for a way to give the book a lavish launch in Dallas or on TV.

### History of the Literature

Scores of possible participants are exposed in *Who Shot JFK? A Guide to the Major Conspiracy Theories* (\$12), an October Fireside original from Simon & Schuster. Written by Bob Callahan, a book packager and former speech writer for Sen. Robert Kennedy, illustrated by artist Mark Zingarelli and based on information compiled by David Park and Peter Dale Scott, *Who Shot JFK?* profiles upward of 20 conspiracy speculations.

"My work for Robert Kennedy might have blinded me to all these theories until the Stone movie jerked me awake," Callahan says from his home base in California. "I think this is a real murder case, and I have a feeling that all of the pieces still aren't there."

Explaining his book, which he calls "a history of the literature of the conspiracy," he says, "it's like a chronological *Reader's Digest* version of my reading of all this stuff. It's the most comprehensive look at the history of the arguments as they developed." Oswald was involved in the assassination, Callahan concedes, and there may even be a remote possibility that he acted alone. "But I wanted to establish sympathy for the point that

this is still an open case," he says. "The problem is the politics surrounding the case. The people around Oliver Stone were on a blind leftie mission. They were just as blind as the Warren Commission was."

Zingarelli's noir graphics are reminiscent of those found in the old *True Crime Quarterly*, says Callahan: "Mark's art is driven by the narrative. If the theories get goofy, the art gets goofy, and it's serious where it should be."

S & S has extensive marketing plans, with reader's copies at the ABA, a five-city author tour, a 25-city radio satellite tour, national print advertising and a counter display with riser. The first printing is 35,000.

### Other Entries, Other Opinions

Carroll & Graf's November entry is *Killing the Truth: Deceit and Deception in the JFK Case* (\$23). The author is Harrison Edward Livingstone, a conspiracy believer, who, with Robert J. Groden (see Viking book above), wrote *High Treason*, self-published in hardcover by Livingstone several years ago and put into paperback by Berkley. Carroll & Graf published Livingstone's *High Treason 2* in hardcover in 1992, and will produce the trade paperback this year.

"Most of the people who've done the research and interviewing on the assassination have been independent writers," says publisher Kent Carroll. "*Killing the Truth* is about who these people are. It suggests that many

have, for one reason or another, put out a lot of disinformation, furthering the conspiracy.

"Livingstone," continues Carroll, "knows what he's talking about. He's the guy who discovered and made public the fact that Kennedy's adrenal glands had atrophied because of medication he was taking. He also theorized that he would probably have died in office anyway." First printing will be at least 50,000 copies, Carroll says.

David S. Lifton is still working on the manuscript of a Lee Harvey Oswald biography, so his book for Dutton, *Oswald: He Led Three Lives*, has been postponed until 1994. Lifton, who earlier wrote *Best Evidence*, which charged an assassination conspiracy at the highest levels of the federal government, has reportedly been granted unlimited access to Marina Oswald and has conducted interviews with the Russians who knew her husband.

In November, Dutton will publish *Cause of Death: The Final Diagnosis* (\$23) by Cyril Wecht, a forensic pathologist who intends to settle a number of disputatious cases, including that of JFK's death. The publisher says that Wecht offers new information on the president's missing brain and thoroughly discredits the single bullet theory. He also offers proof that Sirhan Sirhan could not have fired the shot that killed Robert Kennedy.

*Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* by Peter Dale Scott (see Fireside book above), a poet and professor of English at UC Berkeley, suggests that JFK's death was more than an isolated incident (University of California Press, Oct., \$25). Scott maintains that it was symptomatic of a secret agenda being played out well beneath the surface of American international and domestic policies. Among his considerations are Kennedy's plans to withdraw troops from Vietnam, his cooperation with his Joint Chiefs of Staff and 1963 collaboration between Army intelligence and the Dallas police.

On a more personal—and wrenching—note, an account of JFK's assassination is recalled from Edward Kennedy's point of view in McGinniss's biography of the senator from Massachusetts, *The Last Brother* (\$25), due in October from S & S, with a two-part section forthcoming in *Vanity Fair*. The book portrays a man peripheral to the central drama of the Kennedy family even during the aftermath of the Dallas shooting.

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January 4, 1994

Mr. Harold Weisberg  
7627 Old Receiver Road  
Frederick, MD 21701

Dear Harold,

I appeared on Fox Morning News with Gerald Posner sometime in November. After the show he took me aside and told me, "look, I know the case isn't closed." He said, in essence, that the title was intended to be provocative. Also that he had had some conversation with George Lardner in which he asked Lardner whether he would be bothered if the title had been "Case for the Prosecution" instead of "Case Closed," and Lardner said no.

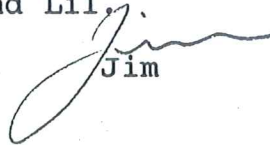
He also told me that his goal was simply to get Oswald back into the picture, saying "he hasn't been there for the past 30 years." As I understood it, he would be satisfied if he succeeded only in getting the question of Oswald's guilt back into the debate. You may want to check with Paul Hoch on this, as he told me he had explained this position to Hoch.

After the Fox show, I appeared with Posner on an Irish talk show by telephone. This was probably a week or two after the Fox show. During the course of this show I noted that Posner had told me that he knew that the case is not closed. Posner did not dispute my statement.

Enclosed is a copy of the memo in which the FBI proposes to give the HSCA a copy of the Dallas field office files on JFK being made available to you--if all else fails. I think this is one of the documents you recently asked me for.

Very hastily.

Best regards to you and Lil.

  
Jim

From a stranger in today's mail:

"I have it on the best authority, as a matter of fact, that Bob Loomis has been seen skulking the Random (House) halls with a copy of your book in his hand muttering vague threats of lawsuits (for which RH hasn't a legal leg to stand on, of course) . . . the knowledge of which I hope delights you as much as it does me."

For those who do not know, Loomis is a RH v.p. and executive editor and he was Posner's editor on Case Closed.

Earlier in the letter this person makes it clear he is talking about Case Open.

~~XX~~ RH ~~also~~ also went to some trouble on the marketing and planning sessions with Case Closed to see to it that anyone at all <sup>P</sup>sketical was removed from that project.

From what Posner has said to at least one reporter Loomis knew that Posner was doing some plagiarizing because it was to him that Posner went to get an OK for a change in the contracted book as soon as he knew about the Failure Analysis work that Posner presents as done for him in the book.

O Poor Oswald's ghost! How can he possible survive what M<sup>m</sup>ailer said to promote the Book of the "onth Club edition of Tales?

"I'll never forgive [Oswald]," BOMC's Mailing headed "Extraordinary Lives" quotes him as telling BOMC's executive editor Andre Bernard and its Creative Director Joseph Cummins, Mailer says, "Because e'll nev4er 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."

Perhaps not Mailer's "notion" but most Americans do not think as he thinks. If this represents any thought at all.

Anything other than the determined ignorance with which Mailer began and adhered to with equal determination.

Preventing World War III at the time of the Cuba Missile Crisis was not greatness to Mailer?

Or giving the country the spirit it has not had since then?

Or beginning detente after all those years of the bitter Cold War?

2/12/73

Hal



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▶ AUTHORS LEAGUE ASKS WASHINGTON TO ACT ON PUBLISHING TAKEOVERS

The Authors League of America has written to the Senate Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly Legislation protesting what it calls "a massive wave of acquisition" in the publishing industry and calling upon the legislators to restore some of the houses recently taken over by giant corporations to independent ownership. Citing recently announced plans by ITT to acquire Putnam, the ALA said that the centralization of control represented by this and other takeovers of previously independent houses "is bound to affect adversely the ability of the remaining independent publishers to compete and to survive." It deplored the decreasing number of outlets available to authors, particularly in the case of "controversial" works, and suggested that big corporations were more responsive to outside pressures, political and economic, on their publishing policies than were independents. "It is argued that these dangers are avoided because the large corporate owners allow their publishing subsidiaries to operate independently," the ALA letter declared, but added: "This is a temporary and often illusory safeguard. The reins of control gradually will be tightened." The letter was signed by Jerome Weidman, as ALA president. A spokesman for the subcommittee said in Washington that the body did not intend to look into publishing takeovers "as such," but that at hearings in March into economic concentration in various fields, it would look into the communications area, in which ITT figures.

▶ MAILER LAUNCHES HIS "FIFTH ESTATE"

Norman Mailer, fresh from his \$50-a-head 50th birthday party Monday night ("only about a quarter the size of Truman Capote's, but at least everyone paid to come to mine") took time out the following day to try to enlighten a puzzled press about his proposal for a citizen body to check on America's "secret police"--the FBI and the CIA. What he has in mind, he said, is a body something like Nader's Raiders or the American Civil Liberties Union, which could keep an eye on Governmental surveillance activities. He has some people in mind for a steering committee to study the idea, and the "take" from his party will get the funding started. Subjects he feels worthy of study by such a group would include the Kennedy assassination, "still a major unsolved mystery in American life," and such recent political events as the Watergate affair and perhaps even the Eagleton case. Stressing that he wanted only to see if anyone was seriously interested in the proposal, and would then back out, Mailer said "I want only to be a literary man the rest of my life. I don't trust myself to be anything else." Good news for Robert Markel, editor at Grosset & Dunlap for Mailer's forthcoming book on Marilyn Monroe; he says Mailer's copy is still coming in on time, and the book is to be a full-length one, not just a brief essay to accompany pictures of the actress.

▶ LIPPINCOTT GETS THE "PLANE CRASH CANNIBALS" STORY

The 16 survivors of last October's Andes plane crash, who survived 70 days only by cannibalism of their companions' bodies, have given the J. B. Lippincott company exclusive world-wide rights to their story. Edward L. Burlingame, the firm's editor-in-chief, went to Montevideo, Uruguay, along with several other U.S. publishers, to bid for the story. The bidding involved guarantees of up to \$500,000, and Lippincott won the unanimous approval of the survivors, who have guaranteed full cooperation. Author Piers Paul Read will write the book after talking to everyone involved in the incident. He is already in Montevideo, and expects to deliver a manuscript by September.



s has always been true with the major media and books in support of the official assassination mythology Mailer was greeted with warmth and treated with respect on his April 27 appearance on Good Morning America.

Like Mailer, and like the major media forever TV in particular, GMA assumed Oswald's guilt and asked no questions about that. In his ~~creampuff~~ response to creampuff question that led him to boast and plug his book, Mailer said that in his book he "look "looks at Oswald like a character in a novel."

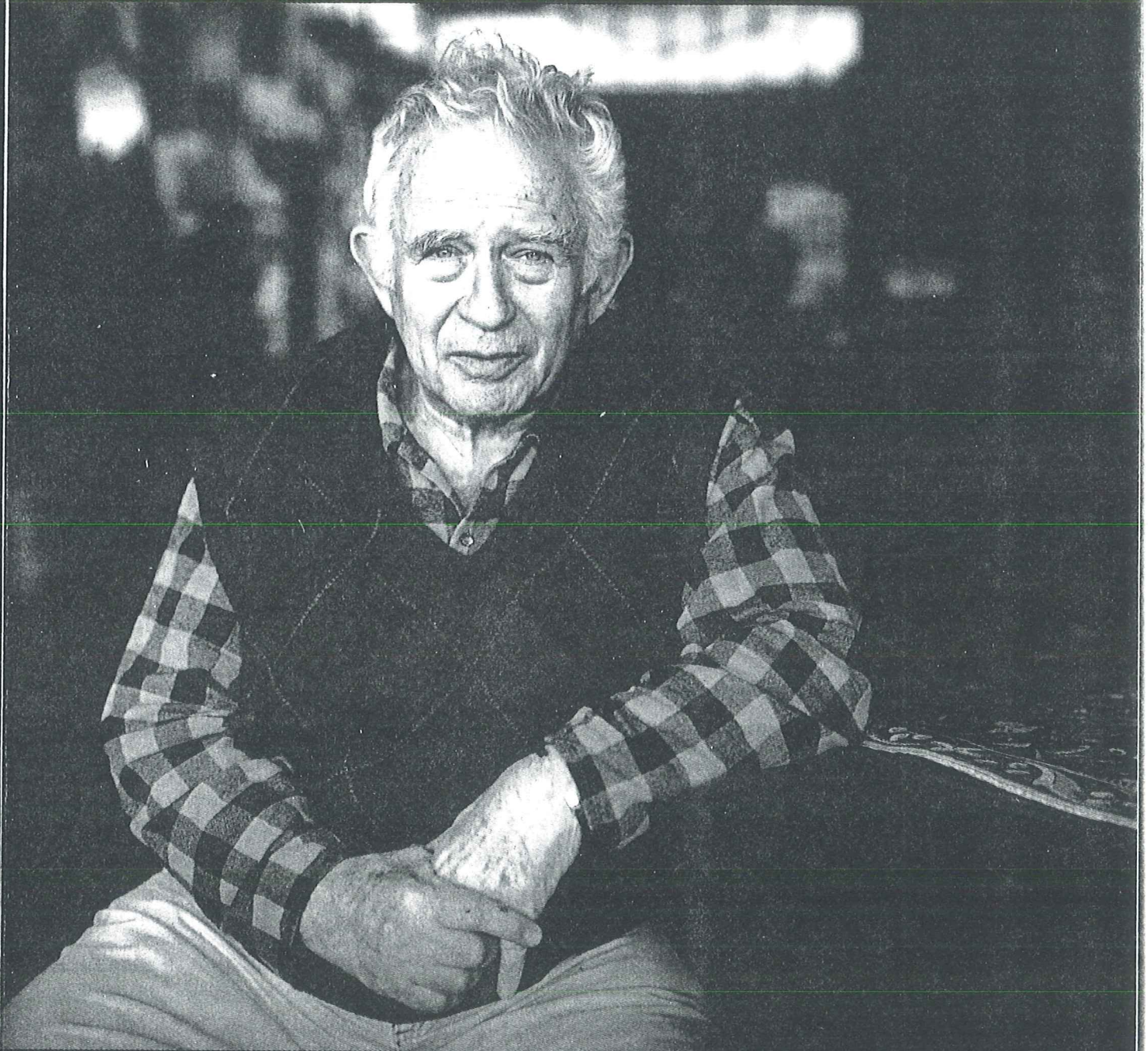
That was a moment of Mailer's aberrational honesty: he wrote a novel.

COMPLIMENTARY

# AT RANDOM

No. 11

BOOKS AND BOOKPEOPLE FROM RANDOM HOUSE • SUMMER 1995



## NORMAN MAILER AND THE KGB TAPES

GEORGE FOREMAN'S HARD-HITTING BOOKLIST • KENNETH TYNAN'S LETTERS  
JAN MORRIS IN LOVE • CHARLES MCCARRY'S WASHINGTON INTRIGUE  
THEODORE ROSZAK MEETS FRANKENSTEIN • GAIL SHEEHY'S NEW MAP OF LIFE

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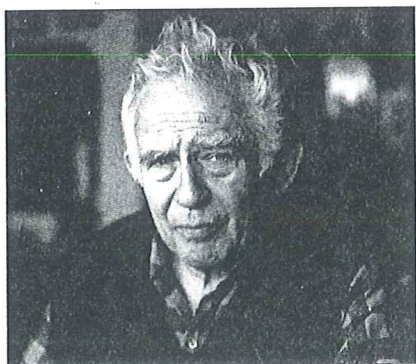
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**THE COVER:** Photographed at home in Brooklyn for *At Random* by Christopher Bierlin, Norman Mailer spent months in Minsk researching Lee Harvey Oswald's Russian years. The author had unprecedented access to KGB tapes of Oswald, as well as to diaries and letters.



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**RATING OUR NATIONAL OBSESSIONS:** We are forever fascinated with giants and giant-killers. But how does the “desperately unpleasant” O. J. Simpson case compare to our “number one obsession,” alleged Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald? “There’s a great deal at stake in terms of race relations,” says Norman Mailer, “but nothing in terms of political forces”



# AMERICA'S OBSESSIONS

NORMAN MAILER TALKS ABOUT LEE HARVEY OSWALD, JFK, THE KGB,  
O.J. SIMPSON, AND THE NASTY NINETIES

AN INTERVIEW BY SEAN ABBOTT

**I**t is a long, steep climb to the apartment at the top of the Brooklyn Heights town house where Norman Mailer lives, and one realizes that this daily ascent must be one of the secrets to Mailer's enduring vigor. He stands at the railing, a smiling, beneficent presence, a man who obviously enjoys welcoming guests to his aerie, with its sweeping view of lower Manhattan and New York Harbor. The streets outside are deserted on this frigid February morning, but Mailer's apartment is a constant hurlyburly of family members and assistants coming and going. It is not unlike being in a theater during

an especially frantic technical rehearsal, and soon enough a small door opens near the ceiling and a pair of legs descends a ladder—it's Mailer's son Matthew, emerging from his sleeping loft. (Matthew, a special-effects artist, has contributed two ghouls to the apartment, a pair of realistic-looking skeletons with withered, putrefying flesh that loom over the table in the dining area. “We call them The Family,” his father confides with a laugh.) Mailer, who has lived here for thirty-two years, gazes across the wide expanse of water and muses on the transformation of the southern tip of Manhattan,

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Left to right: (first two) UPI/Bettmann, Reuters/Bettmann

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sal, and the ceiling—it's a sleep-tist, has it, a pair of feathers, le in the sky," his who has crossed the Manhattan,

AT RANDOM

Left to right (first two) UPI/Bettmann, Reuters/Bettmann

now a virtual wall of metal and glass. "There used to be small buildings at the water's edge, with taller buildings rising gradually behind them. You might have thought you were in the mountains. Now you know exactly where you are—corporate America."

In his writing and in his life, Mailer has long battled the sensibility that would render Manhattan identical to Dallas. He rightfully occupies the position of Distinguished Man of Letters, and he has produced some of the essential works of the modernist canon, among them *The Naked and the Dead*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, *The Armies of the Night*, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, *The Executioner's Song*, and his strange masterpiece, the gorgeous and sublime *Ancient Evenings*. Mailer returns to book-length nonfiction for the first time in sixteen years with *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (Random House, May), a massive study of Lee Harvey Oswald that is based on Mailer's access to secret KGB documents concerning Oswald's two and a half years (from 1959 to 1962) in Russia. This crucial period in Oswald's life has always been one of the central mysteries of the Kennedy assassination, and scholars and

investigators have long been frustrated in their attempts to obtain information on Oswald from the Soviets.

Mailer first visited Russia in 1984 and was invited back in 1986 with other prominent Western intellectuals to attend a conference hosted by Mikhail Gorbachev. Through the efforts of investigative reporter Lawrence Schiller, Mailer was given exclusive access to the KGB material on Oswald during a six-month research-fest to Russia in 1992-93. Mailer and Schiller also interviewed the people who had known and befriended Oswald, along with the KGB agents whose assistants had spied on Oswald through a peephole in his Minsk apartment and recorded his frequent spats with his Russian-born wife, Marina. *Oswald's Tale* "depends upon the small revelations of separate points of view," Mailer writes, and the result is the richest psychological portrait we have yet had of the maddeningly enigmatic Lee Harvey Oswald. In *Oswald's Tale* Norman Mailer has mounted a "search for the nature of the man who ascended to the summit of our national obsessions [and] became our First Ghost."

AT RANDOM: Toward the end of your novel *Harlot's Ghost* the top figures in the CIA are sitting around in a panic after the Kennedy assassination, and John McCone [CIA director from 1961 to 1965] exclaims in frustration, "Who is this Oswald?" Is *Oswald's Tale* your way of answering this question before moving on to the second volume of *Harlot's Ghost*?

NORMAN MAILER: Well, I'd had my own idea of who this Oswald was. I was having fun with McCone. Really what it came down to is I had always had great curiosity about Oswald and what the story might be. And I also wanted to know a lot more about Russia and the KGB since the second part of *Harlot's Ghost* is going to be about that, and I felt a little inadequate to deal with it in any depth. So then Larry Schiller came along—and of course I'd done *The Executioner's Song*, among other books, with Larry—and said, "Listen, we can get access to the KGB. Would

you like to go over there and do a book on Oswald's life in Russia?" I loved the idea of it because I thought it would do two things at once—it would satisfy my curiosity on Oswald, and it would also get me beefed up for the second volume of *Harlot's Ghost*.

AR: How did Schiller get access?

NM: You have to understand, Schiller is the man who interviewed O. J. Simpson. Schiller has to be one of the most skillful investigative reporters in the world today, and he knows a hundred different ways of obtaining access. Larry had produced and codirected [for TV] *Peter the Great* back in the eighties and had developed all sorts of contacts in Russia over the years. He also had a translator with whom he was close, a formidable young lady named Ludmila Peresvetova, whom he later married. I think she helped him to convince the KGB establishment that they could do worse than open their files as a way of underlining that the old KGB was changing. Remember that in 1992 the KGB was relatively open; the Communist coup against Gorbachev had failed the year before.

AR: How did you and Schiller divvy up the work?

NM: We work together very well because he's good at all the things I don't do that well. He gets people organized for interviews. I'd get bogged down in the administration. When you're in a foreign country and you don't speak the

language, trying to find people for interviews can take up almost all your time. Schiller arranged the meetings. We'd interview our subjects together with Ludmila. She was very opinionated and had her own ideas on everything, but we did listen to her carefully because she knew an awful lot about her country. Of course, it did take three times as long to do an interview in Russia as it did in America—one hour for the English, one hour for the Russian, and one hour for arguing with Ludmila.



MINSK IN THE GLOOM OF WINTER:  
Mailer in the working-class neighborhood where he lived while researching Oswald's Russian life

[Laughs.] We would often pose a question and she'd say, "I simply refuse to ask them that question in that manner. It will offend them too profoundly." The query might have been something on the order of "When was your father arrested?" That's not the way you ask a question in Russia. You say, "Could you name the year that, looking back upon it, was a time that you would call 'the year of our troubles?'"

AR: You had to edge your way to specificity.

NM: Just about always. The Russians had a well-founded aversion to specificity; it could get you nowhere, specificity.

AR: That's interesting, because you note at the beginning of the book that the definite and indefinite articles are not employed in Russian, nor is the verb "to be." Its a much more direct way of speaking.

NM: Much more direct. All the more reason to be evasive.

AR: What was it like to live there for six months? I saw the pictures of your living quarters in Minsk, which . . . I'm at a loss for words.

NM: The pictures look elegant. [Laughs.] No, it was kind of drab. I was paying two hundred bucks a month for the apartment. Every apartment in Minsk was more or less the same. A luxury apartment was an apartment that had four rooms. But the rooms were always small, the furnishings were almost always the same. You never found anyone who was living very poorly; you never found anyone who had any wealth—it really was a society of relative equality. I happened to be living in a workers' apartment house, but I only found that out in an odd way: One day, a woman who was being interviewed by us was brought by our driver to my apartment house to pick me up, and we went on together to Ludmila's hotel, where the interview was to take place. I was curious about my

Norris Church Mailer

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neighborhood and asked the woman about it, and she said, "Oh, it was quite a shock when I saw where you were living." She meant that invidiously. I, a well-known author, was living in a disreputable neighborhood. It turned out it was a working-class neighborhood. Now, the apartment house I was in was just as good as any other apartment house in Minsk. Everybody lived at the same level. In fact, workers very often made more rubles a month than the doctors. But what had become a substitute for money was snobbery; there absolutely was a class system, but it was based on culture. To the degree you were cultivated, you belonged to a higher class. It had nothing to do with how well you lived.

**AR: How did she know that just driving by?**

NM: Although all the apartment houses were equal, workers were generally housed near their factory, so they could walk to work. About the only way you could tell you were in a working-class neighborhood was that on Friday and Saturday night the eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds would get drunk outside, and that was fun, because they were tough but they weren't vicious, and you could kid around with them—"Ya, *Americansky*"—which intrigued them.

**AR: Living as an American under these circumstances, do you think you had a good sense of how Oswald lived when he was there?**

NM: Staying in Minsk gave me quite an idea of why Oswald wanted to leave. The weather was the most pervasive element. It's some of the toughest weather you're ever going to find. Not because it's extreme. You don't have any heroic feeling that you're battling the elements. It's not much colder than New York, but it's *darker*. The sun almost never shines. There was one stretch of three weeks where I saw the sun come out through a haze for a half hour on one afternoon. For the rest of those three weeks, the skies were cloudy from morning to night, and of course Minsk is further north than New York. It gets dark earlier. As winter came on, it would turn dark by about three P.M., and it wouldn't get light in the morning until nine. So you do begin to live in a northern gloom. And Oswald was a southerner. Must have felt it doubly. He always complained about being cold. But it's more than that. The *gloom* of the weather was extraordinary.

**AR: It sounds hellish.**

NM: The one thing that relieves Russia is the feeling you get occasionally when you finally do see something beautiful—it is so beautiful that it knocks you out. It's like meeting someone who's incredibly ugly and then they smile and for one moment you see all their beauty in that smile. And you're overcome. So by the same token, when the sun came out for half an hour on that one day—God, but Minsk became a beautiful place. All the buildings

were gilded with a late-afternoon bronze.

**AR: Did you get to see Oswald's apartment?**

NM: Yes. His apartment was tiny. The living room was about the size of a good prison cell, maybe twelve by nine. He lived in the nearest thing to an elegant neighborhood, though. Minsk had some fine old buildings, built in a nineteenth-century style, with pillars. When the city was rebuilt after the war, its core was fashioned to a degree after Leningrad. Then, as housing needs grew, the apartments got drabber until in the last circle around the city there are endless high-rises. You could think you were in some of the drearier portions of Queens or Co-op City in the Bronx. Just part of the general uglification of the world that modern architecture has produced.

**AR: There seemed to be a lot of sexual repression in Minsk in Oswald's day. Is this still the case?**

NM: If you could take all the fundamentalists in America, and implant Russian into them overnight so that they would have absolute command of the language, and ship them over there—not now, but in the old days—they would have been so much happier than they ever were in America. Sex was puritanical, and the streets were always safe under communism. You might be arrested and sent away for twenty years, but that was another matter. Certainly if you wanted to walk through a park at night there was no problem. And although there was no active church as such, my God, those people were more law-abiding and more familial than any average sort of Americans you're going to meet.

**AR: Was Minsk important to Oswald's development? He was sent there when he was twenty; he left Minsk at twenty-two. These are formative years. Would he have become a different Oswald if he hadn't gone to Minsk?**

NM: Most of us have various kinds of imbalance within ourselves. That imbalance either festers and becomes larger, or it diminishes, depending to a degree on how much luck we have in our lives. Do we find the right kind of job or the right situation or the right marriage or the right whatever—whatever is most important to us? Very often, such luck will take care of much of that imbalance and we'll end up having rather interesting and slightly jagged lives, perhaps, but we don't crash.

My guess is that if Oswald had gotten what he expected to get when he went to the Soviet Union, he would have had a different kind of life and it might have been more interesting. He might still have crashed, but I doubt it.

**AR: What did he expect to get?**

NM: Well, he wanted to be famous. He had *enormous* desire to gain *world* recognition. No small ambition there. Part of his tragedy was that immense ambition when his qualifications were at best mediocre.

Even now, thirty-two years later, she is still angry with him. He had no right to abandon her. Most of the details of their marriage have long since faded from her memory, and only a few, stray images remain: the red dress she wore on the night of their first encounter at the Trade Union Palace in Minsk; his smell, which at first she found so acrid, so nauseating. And that fateful night, their last night together, when he wanted her so much and she refused him. The night of November 21, 1963 still haunts her.

Marina Oswald's past weighs heavily on her. But after thirty years of interviews and interrogations, she has difficulty distinguishing her own memories from what she has heard and read. Living on a ranch in Texas with her second husband, she turns away most inquiring visitors and is eager to forget the past.

For Norman Mailer, Marina made an exception. The author had embarked on a quest to discover who Lee Harvey Oswald really was. Because it is only by understanding Oswald's character, Mailer believes, that one can know whether he shot President Kennedy, and whether he was capable of acting alone.

The picture of Marina and Lee that Mailer presents in *Oswald's Ghost* is that of a querulous but not ill-suited pair. Phenomenally ambitious, both believed they should be

## THE HAUNTING



## OF MARINA

players on a bigger stage: While Oswald dreamed of captivating the world's attention, Marina yearned for a more sophisticated, cosmopolitan life. Oswald was a foreigner, and in provincial Minsk, he attracted attention. Little did Marina know then just how much attention her future husband would attract.

Like Mailer, Marina is curious about Oswald; like Mailer, she sees him as a mystery. But she values peace over understanding. "If we go through Lee's character, I myself would like to find out: Who is he? Was he really that mean of a person?—which I think he was—but it's a hard road for me to take because I do not want to understand him. I'm mad at him. Very mad at him, yes."

Mailer doesn't hide his sympathy for Marina. "She sits in a chair, a tiny woman in her early fifties, her thin shoulders hunched forward in such pain of spirit under such a mass of guilt that one would comfort her as one would hug a child," he writes. "What remains of what was once her beauty are her extraordinary eyes, blue as diamonds, and they blaze with light as if, in divine compensation for the dead weight of all that will not cease to haunt her, she has been granted a spark from the hour of an apocalypse others have not seen. Perhaps it is the light offered to victims who have suffered like the gods." ■

Joy de Menil

AR: He was dyslexic, but an avid reader. And he aspired to be a writer.

NM: Exactly. Now, he expected that the Russians would welcome him, and he would become a world celebrity, and he'd be a spokesman. Instead, they sent him off to Minsk, to work in a factory, to be *observed*, which he knew or didn't know. He probably did know. Even the KGB couldn't tell you whether or not he knew he was being observed.

The one thing he wasn't prepared for was the distrust that the Russians had for him. They didn't know what to make of him. Was he sincere? In which case they had to take care of him, treat him properly. Or was he some new, exotic CIA implantation? Had the CIA decided to send over someone who was not wholly balanced, and who did not have the credentials to be an agent? But who nonetheless was so bizarre that his presence would reveal by Soviet reaction to him how they functioned? Now, the KGB used to do a lot of that. Working in foreign countries, they would create various sorts of provocative situations to get an insight into how the intelligence service in a country was functioning. They assumed the CIA was doing that. It was a real possibility for them. So, they decided that they would not do anything but observe him. They wouldn't interview him. They wouldn't debrief him.

AR: Not even about his tour of duty as a marine in Japan?

NM: They were terribly vain about the amount of knowledge they had about American military activities in Japan and the Far East. When I went over to Russia I was certain that they had debriefed him in depth and directly. It was hard for me to believe that this was not the way they had done it. But I got to understand a little more about the KGB. They are more conservative than the FBI.

AR: That is hard to believe.

NM: Well, we've been brainwashed about the Evil Empire and have an impression of these incredibly malign people who spent all their time killing. Actually what you found was a huge number of bureaucrats who were very proud to be in the KGB because it was the most intelligent organization in the Soviet Union, and even in the old days they were the only ones who ever received any real knowledge, because they had to have more understanding than other Soviets as to what the situation might be in other countries. But they were *incredibly* conservative. There was very little to gain by being audacious. If you were bold and you messed up, that was going to injure your career profoundly, whereas if you kept doing the proper thing and the safe thing, you could count on rising steadily. So

UPI/Bettmann

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they were most conservative with Oswald, and they never debriefed him directly. I ended up believing them. Given their logic, there was no reason to debrief him directly. If he was a spy he would have been able to give a detailed report to the CIA sooner or later on what KGB techniques of debriefing had been, and the KGB didn't want that. So they just observed him in great detail, and ended up with a dossier on him that was about a foot and a half high.

**AR: What if he had been allowed to stay in Moscow, instead of being shipped off to Minsk?**

NM: I think if he had stayed in Moscow and had gone to a university, or to a Foreign Languages Institute, and had been well regarded, then he might have ended up having a life as a Russian. That's possible. He might still have decided to return to the United States. He did have a restless element in him.

**AR: The impression I get from your book is that it's America that turns him. It almost seems inevitable that in America he is going to crash.**

NM: Well, I think he was much better regarded in the Soviet Union. Oswald was a bit of a movie star in Minsk. That is, all the girls wanted a date with him. He was an American and it was terribly exciting. You remember there's that moment when his future wife, Marina, comes home and says to her aunt, "Valya, get dressed. Make a cup of coffee. Show a little culture. I've got an American with me!" It was such a catch to bring home an American, and Marina was fairly blunt about it; certainly one of the reasons she married him was to marry a foreigner; it would separate her from the other girls. So Oswald received a good deal of warmth in Minsk. He had good friends in Minsk. He had people who really liked him. To a degree he was part of a community. He also was unpopular with a lot of people because he was a lazy worker, and they are terribly puritanical about work there. He was bored stiff finally because there wasn't that much to do. Before he met Marina, even, he was thinking of going back to America. But when he did return, people were very distrustful of him. He also had a lot of trouble getting work, which was another thing. He had no good friends except for George De Mohrenschildt, who was doubtless debriefing him for the CIA, as I try to show in the book.

[Dallas-based gadabout Baron George De Mohrenschildt was "the only man in the world who had known both Jacqueline Kennedy when she was a child and Marina Oswald when she was a wife and widow," Mailer writes in *Oswald's Tale*. In September 1962, the 51-year-old De Mohrenschildt introduced himself to the 23-year-old Oswald, who was then living in poverty and obscurity in Fort Worth. De Mohrenschildt later acknowledged a loose association with the CIA to Kennedy assassination investigators. Facing a subpoena from the House Select Committee on Assassinations, De Mohrenschildt killed himself with a shotgun in 1977.]

**AR: Part of the search of *Oswald's Tale* is for evidence of Oswald's soul, for some sense of greater complexity within him, because the evidence that we otherwise have is of this horribly stunted man.**

NM: The general understanding has been that he was half insane, but also trivial, that he was not an interesting fellow. I think he was a protagonist. That is, he was a man who made things happen, and he made them happen out of his own desire, which not everyone can do. I ended up finding him much more interesting than I thought I would. I went into the book hoping to find new evidence of a conspiracy—I still don't know how many elements of a conspiracy there may be, but I did decide that Oswald thought in large terms, in heroic terms. He measured his life against people like Lenin, Hitler, Mao, Castro. He saw himself as a future leader of the world. He was not small at all in that sense. His ambition and his fantasy life were large, large indeed. And he was bold. He had his own kind of courage and I found him moving, even, because he was timid as well. He was full of fear along with everything else.

**AR: Let me read you a passage from *The Presidential Papers*, the book you wrote for the eyes of President Kennedy, to counter the "intellectual malnutrition" that every president suffers at the hands of his advisers. In "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" you describe the heroic Kennedy, the Kennedy who is in the water with his PT crew in World War II, who swims three miles with a leather strap in his teeth, hauling his crippled engineer to safety, despite the severe and painful wounds in his own back. Afterwards, having recovered from a risky operation on his back—an operation that might have killed him—he returns to active duty in the Navy and is "so bold in his attacks" that he terrifies his crew. Why does he take these insane chances? You write: "It is the wisdom of a man who senses death within him and gambles that he can cure it by risking his life. It is the therapy of the instinct, and who is so wise as to call it irrational? . . . Not everyone can discharge their furies on an analyst's couch, for some angers can be relaxed only by winning power, some rages are sufficiently monumental to demand that one try to become a hero or else fall back into that death which is already within the cells."**

NM: I wish I'd quoted that for this book. [Laughs.] It fits Oswald, I think.

**AR: That's a pretty extraordinary observation. You're saying Kennedy and Oswald are made of the same stuff?**

NM: This was my interpretation of Kennedy, and who's to say it was accurate? I would like to think it was accurate since I was the author of it, but there's no way I can support it in formal argument. It's true of Kennedy or it isn't. It's a supposition, an analysis of a certain sort of character. It fits a good many people. I think it fits just about every

stuntman you could ever meet. Why are people stuntmen when the chances of getting seriously hurt are very large? It's because that's their cure. They're brave enough and bold enough to see a cure there, and to exercise it. If you're a good enough rock climber, sooner or later you always have to face something that you're not going to be able to bring off. So, in that sense, Oswald joins the fold. He is a spiritual rock climber, as was Kennedy. Kennedy had the imagination to see that he could run for president and win. Quite an imagination, considering how conservative America was in the fifties.

AR: But Kennedy has been so horribly diminished, reduced today to tabloid status. Now it seems we've been offered up the carnal Kennedy so many times that we can't easily remember a heroic Kennedy. I think of Kennedy in bed with Marilyn Monroe more often than I think of him in the Pacific with a strap in his mouth. Why is that? Do we live in such meanspirited times?

NM: Oh, we do. Meanspirited times. I can't remember a period that's as meanspirited as this one. Not in America. My God. The eighties was meanspirited enough, but the nineties is going to put it to shame.

AR: Does Kennedy's loss of stature have something to do with that?

NM: Well, you're talking about an ideological war which has been going on between the Democrats and the Republicans ever since Roosevelt, and it's getting more intense every year as the stakes get higher. One aim in that ideological war is to reduce the Kennedys. So long as that family had stature, then the Democratic party was stronger. This is just long-range bombardment. Every bit of power and influence that the Republicans have in the media has been directed toward reducing the Kennedys over the decades. Not that the Kennedys haven't contributed to it themselves occasionally.

AR: You reach the conclusion that Oswald may be viewed in tragic terms because he dared something, he was a protagonist, he mattered. This helps us deal with the death of Kennedy, because otherwise, you say, we are reduced to absurdity if it turns out that a giant was felled by a dwarf. But it seems a small relief. It seems to me that Oswald has done

overwhelming damage because, as you write, "the obfuscation and paranoia which followed the assassination . . . would contribute immensely to the sludge and smog of the world's spirit." The real tragedy, I think, is that Kennedy did not live to establish his greatness, to fix it firmly in place. Oswald, in effect, delivered the carnal Kennedy. And the smog.

NM: Whenever we live with a question that's important to us and we cannot answer it, we have an obsession. The nature of an obsession is that we keep coming back to the

same question and there's no answer. In relation to the psyche, it's like a black hole in space, and the assassination of President Kennedy created a number of obsessions. What kind of president would Kennedy have made? We'd all know more if he'd ended as a great president, a good president, or a failure. We like answers to our questions, even if they are unpleasant answers. And we never got that with Kennedy.

Then, we have the enormous question, Did Oswald do it by himself or not? And if he did, the question that's still unresolved is how much did the FBI and the CIA have to do with tipping the balance in him? I would say that the CIA, in the person of George De Mohrenschildt, debriefed him very carefully. If you begin to look at it in the simplest human terms, his best friend is somebody who is debriefing him and he doesn't even know it, but he has to sense unconsciously that there's more going on here than a simple friendship. He's being used. Terrible damage can be done to someone psychologically if they are being debriefed. It is the equivalent of living with a mate who's unfaithful.

And then there's the question of how much the FBI had to do with all that was going on in New Orleans. That question is still unanswered. There's a very good possibility that Oswald was working as an agent, a paid agent, for the FBI—in COINTELPRO, which I get into in the book. [COINTELPRO was a secret echelon within the FBI, set up in part to place subversive elements within organizations like the American Communist

party.] It can't be proven but there's every indication that they wouldn't have let someone as useful as Oswald slip by. Some of the things he did are hard to understand unless he was a provocateur. For instance, he'd write letters one day apart to the Communist party and the Socialist Workers party. That's like writing a letter to the IRA

### MAILER'S LIST

- The Naked and the Dead*, 1948
- Barbary Shore*, 1951
- The Deer Park*, 1955
- Advertisements for Myself*, 1959
- Deaths for the Ladies*, 1962
- The Presidential Papers*, 1963
- An American Dream*, 1964
- Cannibals and Christians*, 1966
- Why Are We in Vietnam?*, 1967
- The Armies of the Night*, 1968
- Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, 1968
- Of a Fire on the Moon*, 1970
- The Prisoner of Sex*, 1971
- Existential Errands*, 1972
- St. George and the Godfather*, 1972
- Marilyn*, 1973
- The Faith of Graffiti*, 1974
- The Fight*, 1975
- Genius and Lust*, 1976
- The Executioner's Song*, 1979
- Of Women and Their Elegance*, 1980
- Pieces and Pontifications*, 1982
- Ancient Evenings*, 1983
- Tough Guys Don't Dance*, 1984
- Harlot's Ghost*, 1991

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and to the British forces in Ulster on successive mornings, telling each group you want to join them. Wouldn't you assume you have some sort of game going on with activity like that? Because Oswald was sophisticated enough politically to know the difference. So there's evidence that the FBI and the CIA were involved with him, and of course there's the secondary supposition that the moment the assassination occurred, they clamped down completely on any possibility of ever being implicated because it could have destroyed either organization, or damaged it irreparably. After all, they were holding explosive secrets. Like how many times had the CIA tried to kill Castro? There was a lot to be lost there. So in that sense, whether Oswald did it alone or not, the secondary questions are still immense. But, I seem to have lost my point of departure.

AR: Well, we were talking about . . .

NM: Smog. Part of the smog is precisely that there are so many questions and obsessions about Oswald. Oswald is our number one obsession—unless O. J. Simpson is now replacing him. And if you compare the two, what I find so demoralizing about the Simpson case is that finally it's not an interesting or exciting case other than whether O.J. is innocent or guilty. There's a great deal at stake in terms of future race relations, but there's nothing at stake in terms of huge political and government forces engaged in covert internal activities.

AR: I think there's a lot at stake. If O. J. Simpson is acquitted I think there will be an explosion of moral outrage, an uprising that will tear the whole system apart, or at least I like to imagine that there will be.

NM: I think there's going to be an uprising no matter how it turns out. I think it's a desperately unpleasant case, but it doesn't open the large questions that Oswald does. With Oswald we have to ask, To what degree has the government been responsible directly or indirectly for the assassination of the president?

AR: We can talk about Oswald as a person placed somewhere in an organization, somewhere in its depths, but he's also intriguing if we see him as a dangerous loner who is not connected to these larger forces. Did

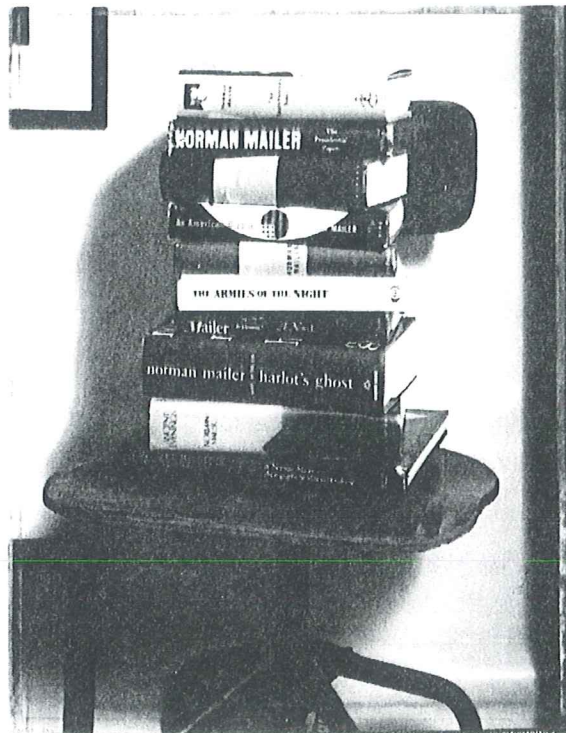
Oswald invent the dangerous loner for us?

NM: Oh, there have always been dangerous loners.

AR: No, I mean as a media figure, the fact we have this guy on film. It seems that he is the defining character.

NM: I think the worst way to look at him is as "the dangerous loner," because that assumes that no matter what happened to him he was going to perform an assassination or do some incredible dastardly deed, and that's too simple. He wasn't a man who lived independently of the life around him. He participated in the life around him. He was not a passive soul, but an active element. When

he got arrested in New Orleans for handing out pamphlets for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, what does he do when he's in jail but call the local FBI man to come over? Now, no matter how you interpret it—and you can in several different ways—no one of those motives is passive. This is a man who is trying to change the given, step by step, with a series of audacious moves. The idea that he is a man who just broods and broods and then goes out and pulls a trigger is not what I believe happened. Don't forget he was working with his rifle, dry-firing it for a half year. My idea of a dangerous loner is someone who is not



connected to anything. Oswald was poorly connected and adversely connected to any number of phenomena, politically, but he was a participant, not a cork washed by the waves. The intent of *Oswald's Tale*, you see, 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.

AR: You said earlier that part of the purpose of writing *Oswald's Tale* was to beef up for the second volume of *Harlot's Ghost*. So what's the status there?

NM: I've started working on it. I'll let you know. [Laughs.] ■

Sean Abbott is the associate editor of *At Random*.

may 18 1995

**AM-NY--People-Mailer,0255**

**Norman Mailer Perplexed Over Book Criticism**

**EDS: contents in final graf may be offensive to some readers**

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) -- Author Norman Mailer says he's puzzled over some of the criticism he's received over his latest book, ``Oswald's Tale.''

``There's been a certain animosity to the majority of the reviews that I don't understand,' ' Mailer said in Thursday's Times Union of Albany.

The book chronicles the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin of President John F. Kennedy, and offers what some have said is a sympathetic view of Oswald.

Mailer said he wasn't trying to shed new light into the assassination.

``I wasn't interested in going over every shred of evidence. That's been done to death. 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,' ' he explained.

Mailer said writing the book changed his views on the much-debated conspiracy theory.

``I started out on this project believing that Oswald acted as part of a conspiracy. I ended up believing Oswald probably acted alone. I still leave the window open a little bit that there was a conspiracy,' ' he said.

While giving a public reading earlier this week, Mailer said that writing the book had aged him.

He also told the Times Union that he has calmed down somewhat in his 72 years -- to a certain extent.

``Maybe I've mellowed a bit. But I'm angrier at certain things, especially politics. There's so much (expletive) going on in politics right now.''

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HAL VERB  
P.O. Box 421815  
S.F., CA. 94142-1815  
JUNE 5, 1995

HAROLD WEISBERG  
7627 OLD RECEIVER ROAD  
FREDERICK, MD. 21702

Dear Hal:

First, I want to thank you for sending me the documents on Schiller. They are much appreciated.

As you requested in your last letter I did call Paul Hock & asked him if he had the index to your book, "Never Again" and he said, yes, he had both your book & the index so there is no need to send him one.

I appreciate your sending me the Index as it is necessary when going over it. I should mention that I have completed reading your book and it is truly great! I'm in the process of writing as many reviews as possible for the various assassination journals and, if possible, perhaps some mainstream press such as the S.F. Chronicle (which, undoubtedly, will ignore them).

Enclosed in this letter are zerox copies of many items and you'll note I've enclosed a summary of the "typos" I found in your book with page & paragraph references. I'm sure you'll find it useful & the publisher can make use of it, too. Since I don't own

new book, "The Golden Age of Us" & there is a reference to an interview Cockburn did of Wesley Liebeler. Liebeler says he sent a psychological profile he did of Oswald to a chief of psychiatry at the Mayo Clinic and that doctor said the "profile" told him more about Liebeler than it did about Oswald!

Cockburn is speaking at a bookstore here in S.F. on June 9<sup>th</sup> and I'll be putting him on the "hot roaster", so to speak, about the absurd stuff he put in his book. I'll be a bit harder on Cockburn than I was with Mailer (the boxer). I don't think Cockburn can go the ten rounds when I confront him! I'm looking forward to it.

By the way I do have at least one tape of Mailer (his interview with Ron Owens of KGO) & I'll be getting another tape Mailer did with Michael Krasny. Some of the stuff he said on the Krasny show are real howlers. If you need the tapes (for actual quotations) I can send them to you.

Some Examples - "Hoover was giving advice to Warren almost every night"; "There's no use trying to interview people here" (he meant Dallas). And the reason Mailer explained is that "all they remember is their last interview with a reporter"; Mailer (on Marina) - "She's full of guilt - suffused with guilt. She had a lot of mixed feelings about us (probably Mailer & Schiller) and I'm sure that

now that the book is out she doesn't like us at all."

As I see it, Hal, the only guilt she feels about herself is allowing herself to be tricked into  talking with them!

Mailer = "I don't identify with Posner's book at all. When he closes the suitcase, he doesn't close it completely. He lets a few clothes hang out."

This is the same Mailer who lambasted Posner when I heard him speak (as "keynote speaker") in Dallas. He accused Posner of "cutting corners" and "sloppy writing". Yet, Mailer uses Posner as a source in his book! (I wonder what the Mayo Clinic men would say of Mailer after reading this statement! Liebelin + Mailer, boy, what a pair!

By the way, I'm tilling a book review on Mailer's book as "The not-so-mysterious Mailer + Oswald in Fantasy (Russia) Land". My piece on Cockburn will be called = "Cockburn Does Dallas".

Some of the other articles I've included relate to the "Fourth Decade". Please note, in particular, the Joe Backes article on how the ARRB is dragging its feet and Backes's quite, almost heroic attempts to do something about it as a one man opposition. Joe is part

copy to: H. WASSER

"There will always be dissident voices . . . perceiving gloom on every side and seeking influence without responsibility. But today, other voices are heard in the land—voices preaching doctrines wholly unrelated to reality. . . . They fear supposed hordes of civil servants far more than the actual hordes of opposing armies. We cannot expect that everyone . . . will 'talk sense to the American people.' But we can hope that fewer people will listen to this nonsense."

These words are from the text of a speech prepared for delivery in Dallas in 1963 by President John F. Kennedy. He was killed by hate before he could deliver them.



**Expert testimony**—Spokesmen for the JFK Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB) say its members "will probably be consulting with" the noted writer Norman Mailer on the lengthy research he conducted in formerly secret Soviet intelligence files, allowing him to psychoanalyze Lee Harvey Oswald for his new book, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*. The release of the KGB's surveillance files on Oswald during his three years as an erstwhile defector in Moscow and Minsk gave Mailer the history of what he calls a mental case.

Mailer is on a promotion tour for the book (it is 828 pages and costs \$30), where he has been defending his "conclusion" that there is "a 75 percent probability" that Oswald acted alone, without the benefit of any of the conspiratorial involvements proposed by various assassination researchers. Mailer says his judgment of Oswald is "based on my estimate of his character"—and of a mind twisted by a fixation on fame.

Mailer also makes some assessments of the assassination research community. To on-air interview questions asking him if he sees any relationship between the Kennedy assassination and the Oklahoma City bombing, Mailer replies that "there is no tie at all." He says that "most people who are conspiratorialists, who believe there was a good deal behind the Kennedy assassination that has never come to light, tend to be of the left. And obviously the ultra-patriots who went in for the terrorist action in Oklahoma City are of the far right." Mailer himself is of the left.

At a brief public meeting in Washington on May 3, five-member ARRB approved its official definition of "assassination document." That's a legalistic weapon to be used, as necessary, in overruling any refusals by government agencies to make their JFK files public. Copies of the "guidance" report will be available on request at the ARRB, 600 E Street N.W., Suite 208, Washington, DC 20530.

The ARRB expects to hold the next in its series of traveling public hearings in New Orleans on June 28.

**Gingrich's "Third Wave"**—Speaker Gingrich poses himself as the prophet of a "technological revolution" that he calls the Third Wave. Like the rest of the Gingrichian gospel, it brings no one any salvation.

A Chicago bank called the First Chicago Corporation is the latest to tell depositors who choose to transact their business with a human teller rather than using an automated teller machine (ATM) that their accounts will be charged each time they do so. Tellers cost more than ATMs, see? Cutting bank personnel and payroll costs—at a national level—saving to them of \$2.3 billion a year, according to the Consumer Federation of America—banks can increase their already growing profits. It's the Absurd Wave. "I want to shift the planet," says Gingrich the Grandiose, but it comes down to "pick your pocket."

**Here they come**—As the latest White House Conference on Aging convened in Washington, the Census Bureau reported that Americans aged 65 and over—a population sector that has already grown 1,000 percent in this century—will more than double again by the year 2050, to about 80 million. By then, one in five of us will be a senior citizen. The super-senior sector, those aged 85 and over, is booming, too—up by 274 percent since 1960. And vote! So President Clinton is making the Republicans step first on Medicare cuts—and boy how they are twisting the knife.

**A reader is lost—and found**—Max Gordon, 92, a loyal reader, was out on his customary hike along the beach walk at Rockaway, NY, when he had a sudden and fatal heart attack. His nephew writes that when the police emergency medical service workers found Max, "a liberal," the only identification he carried with him was an address label on his latest copy of the *Washington Spectator*.

ADDRESS LABEL: If you change your address, or if there is an error on your label, please return a corrected label to us at London Terrace Station, P.O. Box 20065, New York, NY 10011.

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**ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS:**

**HATE**

**The Oklahoma Tragedy and the Forces of Darkness**

- Paranoid vigilantism \_\_\_\_\_
- Limbaugh: Bomb Qaddafi \_\_\_\_\_
- Black helicopters are coming \_\_\_\_\_
- FYI \_\_\_\_\_



# Saint Anselm



COLLEGE

100 Saint Anselm Drive, Manchester, New Hampshire 03102-1310  
(603) 641-7000

May 24, 1995

Harold Weisberg  
7627 Old Receiver Road  
Frederick, MD 21702

Dear Harold:

Hope all is well with you and Lillian.

I just wanted to send along the latest on the Mailer stuff.

The Sunday *Globe* had a review that was critical in some respects but seems to be guilty of the same fundamental error as Mailer, viz., presuming Oswald's guilt.

I also have enclosed the *Parade* piece which I assume you already have. I had two originals and thought you might have some use for another. If not, simply discard it. In taking a quick look at it, I am inspired. The solution to the JFK assassination finally dawned on me! It was NORMAN MAILER. Sure, people will argue endlessly about whether he was in Dallas, whether he had the rifle capability, whether anyone saw Mailer carry the rifle into the Depository. But the only real question is: "Would Mailer, pushed to such an extreme, have the soul of a killer?"

I don't know if I mentioned that Bill sent along the Index to *Never Again!* Gerry will be sending me a disk of *Waketh...*, as soon as exams are over and his secretary can get a copy made.

Take care.

Sincerely,



P.s. I believe I inadvertently used an older address when I sent the Larry King transcript. If you did not receive it, let me know. I'll send another copy.

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On Sunday Morning on CBS-TV this a.m., 6-18/95, the Father's Day lead item being "Who Killed Kennedy?" for all the world as though CBS/Rather and Mailer have not said often enough, on the question of conspiracy, Rather said, "Mailer's conversion (from an alleged belief in a conspiracy) began three years ago, with that KGB deal from which they learned nothing new at all.

Other than what the KGB is capable of.

I found Mailer and his rapid speech hard to understand and I missed much but he did say, with Rather's obvious approval, "If they had made love the night before it might now have happened."

Beginning with slow motion they reran the film of Oswald being killed. When he grimaces and cries out in pain and surprise Mailer says he is exclaiming in protest, "Oh, how can you kill me now?" "Now" being at the moment of what Mailer and other nuts imagine to be the moment of fame for him.

Mailer spoke very rapidly and with intensity.

Norman Mailer  
Doorbell 4  
142 Columbia Heights  
Brooklyn, NY 11201

6/18/95

Harold Weisberg  
7627 Old Receiver Rd.  
Frederick, MD 21702

Dear pathetic Norman,

Catching you by accident on CBS this morning reminds me that I owe you an apology. I did ask you for Schiller's address but I cannot imagine why now. I'd have trouble taking his word about anything even if I knew his life depended on it.

I was not really surprised that again you made a spectacle of yourself with Rather, as you seem to do on all occasions. This time you actually interpreted Oswald's exclamation in pain and surprise when he got Ruby's fatal shot as his actual complaint, "Oh, how can you kill me now?" that "now" being at his moment of fame as you with no originality at all say. When the Commission lawyer submitted their similar gibberish to a prominent psychiatrist he said it told him more about that lawyer than it did about Oswald.

No matter how you try you cannot make the unreal into the real.

While I sorry <sup>over</sup> more over other evil you have done I am sorry that you have besmirched yourself so.

Your refusal to say how much Schiller paid the KGB for gypping him and you and your pretending that nothing at all was paid is the way you leave it. So it is that Schiller is making a liar of you and you will not say a word about it.

Sincerely,



Harold Weisberg

Dear Norman,

5/24/95

The absence of any return address on your letter or its envelope and my having mislaid or misfiled my copy means this will have to wait until I learn your address. But your letter came today and I do not want to delay a reply.

I do not recall asking you for Schiller's address. From my experience his word is worthless and to refer to him as the first title that got him recognition, as a scavenger, is to defame vultures and hyenas. Or was giving me his address your way of <sup>not</sup> avoid telling me of his buying what you had access to from the KGB and how much it <sup>1</sup> creamed him (and you) for? That was my interest.

My belief that you were helped by others comes from my familiarity with their work. You omit what was quite relevant that they also omitted from the same testimony each of you quote and that about what you say your book is about, Oswald. What is by any standard in evaluating the kind ~~of~~ of person he was that you omitted was also omitted by Epstein, Davison and Posner. There is much more than one instances of this but to give you one, his high clearance as a Marine.

In your book and in your letter you refer to conspiracy as a matter of belief when it is a matter of fact and you say you "read a <sup>huge</sup> ~~great~~ amount of "that literature." Did it not once occur to you that if you were seeking evidence of a conspiracy you might read books that advance no theories and from time to time refuted them? In this regard you might consider reading my current NEVER AGAIN! If I had the copy I'd sent it to you, but my publisher is not Random House and my requests for copies are without response.

<sup>or mail</sup> You refer to me as an expert. You asked for no information from me and as you may not remember I offered you access to all the records I'd gotten at the Georgetown gathering of the nuts in 1973. You then hear <sup>of</sup> me speak denouncing all those nutty conspiracies. So you knew that I risked the reception I got there to try to end all that irresponsibility and yet for your book it did not occur to you that <sup>1</sup> I might have some information you could use in it? <sup>Did not think to</sup> ~~or~~ protect your reputation, which I think you may yet come to realize you placed at least in question?

You say that on Oswald's character "the Warren Commission was absolutely the best." Is that why you ignored what the Commission ignored that <sup>1</sup> has been available in varying degrees for 30 years? <sup>In its files?</sup>

Perhaps you say so much you forget what you have said but what you say in your letter is not identical with assuming Oswald's guilt, without looking at any of the evidence, and then arguing that he was guilty because of the character you attribute to him, which I see you doing in your book and in other statements. But then without Oswald's guilt you did not have this book and Schiller had nothing at all for his not inexpensive deal with the KGB.

You are correct in saying that "the odds are that, like all of us, with your notable exception, I did not do enough." Along with doing too much where if you had the intent you say you did you should have learned early on you were wasting you time.

But when I offered you access to all I have and you cannot do any work in the field without know that I do that with everyone, knowing that most will write what I do not agree with, and you regard me as an expert and say that I do not do too little work, it is difficult for me to reconcile ~~me~~ what you say and wrote with not looking at all I have and not asking me for anything.

Including about the dependability of those you do use and their work.

If you do not want to tell me what the deal of which you were part with the KGB was, there is nothing I can do about that. But as of the time Schiller started trying to deal with them they had a profitable little industry of selling what they chose to sell to the highest bidder. Including even a piece of Hitler's skull and of his jawbone. In addition to which Schiller has a record of successful buying, as you learned from Gary Gilmore.

When you spent those days at Penn earlier this year you told those<sup>e</sup> history majors that fiction and history are the same and that history lies. It is not history that lies. It is the <sup>mis</sup>representations of history that lie.

Not infrequently for a purpose.

As the moving finger writes I do not believe what it writes will be the condensations as in The New Yorker and Parade.

And it is already amply recorded that the evidence is not, to ~~you~~ use your word, imp~~e~~net rable."

You just did not want it.

I'm sorry for what you have done to yourself and to your reputation of which, if by any chance innocently, you can get an idea from NEVER AGAIN! And if you want to know more about Posner <sup>as</sup> source, there may be some copies of Case Open still around. That butchery is about 25% of what I wrote. and I've not heard a word from him. You did read his reprint so you knew that I had a few things to say about him. And you also should have noticed that he could say nothing. That is, other than make my case that he had trouble telling the truth even by accident even more solid.

Sincerely,



Harold Weisberg.

In reading and correcting this I decided it is too polite, too understated.

The assassination of any president in our country is a de facto coup d'etat.

You know that. It is inevitable. You cannot look around you today without seeing that this one was no exception. You know what has happened and you cannot avoid seeing and understanding what is happening. And yet in this book and perhaps more in promoting it you make yourself part of that? ~~W~~ For money and whatever else you get from it? And consider yourself a good citizen, an honorable man and writer?

I do not really believe that you have to read ~~NEVER AGAIN!~~ or anything else to know enough of the truth, to understand what you have done, what you made yourself part of. For which there can be no condemnation that is too severe.

Whether or not Schiller suckered you from his greed, it was obvious to you when you realized that Oswald In Minsk was not publishable that it had creamed both of you. Yet you did not have the personal or professional integrity to face it this and to drop your project. Whether that was from ego or the need for money is immaterial. You then became a real literary whore and added what should shame you, from ~~it~~ its concept through your execution of it.

Have you no shame? No more regard for your country? In which you, like I, were born free, as we would not have been had it not given our parents sanctuary. ~~A~~side from what we all owe it you, like I, owe it more, as do so many who are alive and free because of it. Yet in return you do what you have done and are doing?

It is not easy for me to understand how so talented and successful a man could sink to what you have done. And I do regret it, very much.

And at the same time wondering if you have run ~~me~~ dry and have to depend on the likes of Schiller, that pig. Even though I use the word as Orwell did it nonetheless defames swine.

With all those good intentions you once had, with all that talent and those successes, you wind up like this?

With all those gruesome dishonesties in addition, and all the undiluted evil, such as what you undertook to do to "Marina"? To give some spice for X-rated minds to your failures in "Minsk"? For shame!

One more word about your "biography" of the man who had a Top Secret and Crypto clearance as a Marine, which was public through me years ago <sup>and</sup> you do not mention: in his address book he discloses that he had been in contact with a man expelled by the Soviets, when they caught him serving Penkovsky's drops. His name is Alexi Davison and he was from Georgia. Is it not to wonder whether Jean Davison married into his family? And why you made no mention of it? It was public long before you wrote the Foreword to her book. But then did you not get your salvation formula from her in limiting yourself to special interpretation of a small fraction of what was public? Sincerely, Harold Weisberg *HW*

postmarked 5/22 rec'd 5/24

9 May 1995

Dear Harold,

I don't expect you to agree with my methods, but, in truth, I spent thirty years on the conspiratorial side of the fence and had read a huge amount of literature which I never put into the bibliography because I never quoted from it.

The aim of my book was not to solve the case or get into the pro and con of each piece of evidence, since that is best left to experts like yourself. What I wanted to do was search out Oswald's character and I have to tell you the Warren Commission was absolutely the best for that, since as you know, conspiratorialists are concerned with conceivable machines of assassination, that is, scenarios by which assassination could have taken place, and never spent much time on Oswald's character. I felt the most profitable course at this point was to look to see what kind of man he was and what kind of woman Marina was. Look upon my book as not aspiring to a great deal more than that.

As for your suspicion that I had extra help in getting my research together, I had to tell you I had the same suspicion of Posner. Whether that is well-founded or not, I can vow to you by all I have that I did not receive any kind of material or handouts from "other people." The research was done by my assistant, Judith McNally, and myself, and since I did nothing but work on the book, and it did take two years, I'm complimented that <sup>as renowned as</sup> a researcher like yourself thinks I did do much work but in fact, the odds are that like all of us, with your notable exception, I did not do enough.

Larry Schiller's address is Polaris Communications, Inc., PO Box 56056, Sherman Oaks CA 91413.

Sincerely,



Norman Mailer



*to Agel*

I opened to insert this.

I can see a blockbuster book in this for a publisher who does not like Mailer or Random House.

Do you know when RH became his publisher?

And whether he ever paid Little Brown back the \$300,000 I saw ~~an~~ report saying he owed them? H

I've gotten the New Yorker condensation.

Being able to see and understand this and then  
to write thus about does indeed require a remark-  
able genius, like Mailer's.

In inventing what he refers to as Oswald's biography as his means of proving that Oswald was the assassin, the evidence being "impenetrable" to him, there was nothing at all for which he could not hold Oswald responsible for, even auto accidents he had nothing to do with. He was assisted in this by not being encumbered by sources, of which he had had none at all other than his need which stimulated his imagination that in turn got his ESP and mind-reading in overdrive. He liked what he made up and he used it and he was so good at it or the reviewers were either so bleary-eyed or so prejudiced in favor of any rubbish that bore his name they did not notice any of it. He was willing to try to injure Marina, what he says was in her guilty conscience cause Elena's auto accident. (pages 462-3)

Following the dental work, it was agreed that Marina would move over with June to Elena Hall's place. An émigrée, Elena Hall spoke Russian, had a larger apartment, and was separated at this time from her husband, an American. The immediate result was that Lee was in Dallas and Marina was now back in Fort Worth. They were thirty miles apart and he could see her less frequently, but Kleinlerer was standing in for him as resident critic of Marina:

I noticed that [she] did nothing to help Mrs. Hall in the house. Mrs. Hall often complained that Marina was lazy, that she slept until noon or thereabouts, and would not do anything . . . to help.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, Elena Hall and Marina were able to collaborate on certain matters. On October 17, in the evening, the two women knocked on Alexandra Taylor's door in a state of excitement. An hour earlier, they had had June baptized at a Russian Orthodox church. Elena Hall was now the godmother. Since Marina was certain that Lee would object strenuously, she had done it "on the sly" and asked Alexandra not to tell him.<sup>4</sup>

Since Lee's twenty-third birthday was tomorrow, October 18, and they would not be together but thirty miles apart, Marina asked Alexandra if she could leave a small box of new clothes for him. (In those days, Oswald dropped by frequently at the Taylors'.) As soon as Marina returned to Fort Worth, however, she had a change of heart. When Lee called her that night, she told him about the baptism. When he came by the Taylors' apartment to pick up his gift the next day, he was cool. Alexandra remarked: ". . . said he didn't like the idea, but that was all."<sup>5</sup>

On October 18, Lee's birthday, Elena Hall got into a car crash that would put her in the hospital for eight days. About that, Alexandra said, "It was very shocking . . ."<sup>6</sup>

We can assume the émigrés were even more disturbed by the news, particularly when they learned of the baptism. The accident had to intensify everyone's fear of Oswald: Marina, with her deep if unfocused intuitions about magical matters, could hardly be free of the guilty assumption that she had helped to injure Elena Hall.

The immediate result was that Marina now lived alone in Elena's apartment in Fort Worth. Indeed, since Elena Hall went off to New York as soon as she was discharged from the hospital in order to be reunited with her husband, Marina would continue to

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dwelt there alone for more than two weeks. Alex Kleinlerer, left to look after the apartment and make certain that it remained in some kind of order, gave his usual generous evaluation:

On a good many of the occasions that I dropped by the Hall residence during my lunch hour, I found that Marina had not yet awakened. I would have to arouse her by ringing the doorbell and banging on the front door. I would find the household unkept, unwashed dishes in the sink or on the eating table, and hers and the baby's clothing strewn around the room. Marina would come to the door in a wrap-around, her hair dishevelled and her eyes heavy with the effect of many hours of sleep. She would make some excuses about sleeping late.<sup>7</sup>

This may have been the first period of real rest for Marina in years. Who can measure the exhaustions of her harsh adventures in Leningrad, Minsk, and Texas? Now, over the space of a week and three days, she had had six teeth taken out and her daughter baptized and had then been the prime mover—could it be?—behind a fearful accident. No wonder, then, if she overslept and was exhausted on awakening. 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.) In this period, while Elena was away, Lee came to visit for full weekends, and was full of himself.

*McMillan:* “This is your house. I give it to you—all!” he would announce to Marina, sweeping his arm grandly around the entrance hall upon his arrival on a Friday. “Isn't this a fine house I bought you?”

Marina remembers that he was “always running to the ice-box,” a thing he never did at home when he was paying for the groceries himself, to fix a Coke or a sandwich. “A full ice-box!” he would exclaim delightedly before he pounced . . . And at night, he made love to Marina while watching . . . the bedroom television set, a distraction which helped slightly his problem of premature ejaculation. Afterwards, the two of them slept in separate bedrooms, a luxury which Lee said made him feel “like an aristocrat.”<sup>8</sup>

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# Tough Guys Don't Paint

According to Norman Mailer, Picasso was a great believer in machismo but was not a macho man himself.

## PORTRAIT OF PICASSO AS A YOUNG MAN

An Interpretive Biography.  
By Norman Mailer.  
Illustrated. 400 pp. New York:  
The Atlantic Monthly Press. \$35.

By Michael Kimmelman

HE has "a greedy desire for recognition," and "the vanity and the need for group applause of someone like Muhammad Ali." When young, he pushed "his explorations into sex, drugs," and had a lengthy affair that was one of "those delicate, lovely and exploratory romances that flourished like sensuous flowers on slender stems, those marijuana romances of the 50's and 60's in America where lovers found ultimates in a one-night stand, and on occasion stayed together." "Short in stature," "possessed of the ambition to mine universes of the mind no one had yet explored," he was "not macho so much as an acolyte of machismo." He "could not box."

Norman Mailer on Norman Mailer? Not this time, though it's obvious why Mr. Mailer, whose prime subject has always been himself, might have spent more than three decades contemplating a biography of Pablo Picasso. On the other hand, it's not so easy to comprehend why, after all that time, he has come up with such a clumsy and disappointing book, culled, at startling lengths, from already existing biographies. With so many out there, most notably Volume 1 of John Richardson's monumental "Life of Picasso," which covers nearly the same early years, one wonders what Mr. Mailer could have been thinking.

The book, his 29th, is a copiously illustrated account of the span from the artist's birth in 1881 to the start of World War I. Picasso emerges in a familiar guise, as a selfish, superstitious, sometimes cowardly and combative prodigy who moved chameleonlike from one style to another, through one relationship after the next. Mr. Mailer has called his work "an interpretive biography," to distinguish it from a work of original scholarship. This is fair enough, but most of the interpretations are not original.

For instance, Mr. Mailer is not the first to suggest, on the basis of no compelling evidence, that Picasso might have had a homosexual encounter or two as a young man. That dubious honor goes to Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington in her reckless "Picasso: Creator and Destroyer." Who cares one way or another, you might well ask, whether he had such an encounter? But like a dog with a bone, Mr. Mailer takes hold and won't let go. What is noteworthy about his book may be the vigor with which he pursues sensationalistic subjects like this one even while affecting a dispassion toward them. About a self-portrait drawing from 1902-3, for instance, in which Picasso

Michael Kimmelman is the chief art critic of The New York Times.

stands with one hand raised, the other over his heart, Mr. Mailer writes: "One can make too large a case of the nude he did of himself in this period — modest, unadorned, a little seedy, certainly depressed, and taking the vow of allegiance to . . . to what? To his continuing heterosexuality? It is tempting to read too much into this drawing."

Apparently. What Mr. Mailer ignores is that Picasso at the time was hoping to establish his reputation with large-scale, multifigure allegorical compositions, many of which were never undertaken. This self-portrait could be a preparatory drawing for an unrealized work, or possibly one for "La Vie" (1903). "La Vie," as Mr. Mailer knows, derives from studies Picasso drew of himself making various ambiguous gestures. The gestures, as Mr. Richardson has pointed out, relate to images on tarot cards, which fascinated Picasso. It may be that the self-portrait Mr. Mailer refers to is better explained in

a phallus just so much as a vagina: at such moments, no matter one's physical appearance, one has, in the depths of sex, crossed over into androgyny. Picasso was obsessed with the subject."

Leave aside for the moment the paradox of Mr. Mailer's twisted syntax in a book that takes art historians and critics to task for their writing. The basic fact is that Mr. Mailer says Stein influenced Picasso's art. So she did, and Picasso even incorporated an image of a man into her portrait. But scholars have pointed all this out already: Mr. Mailer is appropriating their ideas just to indulge in the sort of grandiose flourishes that are a trademark of his style. In any case, it becomes hard to weigh Stein's significance because other obvious influences on Picasso — like the large women in the works of Renoir and Maillol — are glossed over or missed. Mr. Mailer is so enraptured by the affairs of the artist's life that he regularly plays down the connections between Picasso's works

paralleled in art history, and it would seem to have afforded Mr. Mailer a vast psychological field in which to let his imagination play. What is one to think of a man like Picasso, he might have asked, who on the verge of success suddenly chose to make difficult pictures virtually indistinguishable from someone else's? But Mr. Mailer ignores this question to hop on an old hobbyhorse: in life, he writes, "Braque had legitimate machismo," but in art he "cannot often come off like Picasso. Machismo, obviously, has its mansions and no one was going to be more macho than Picasso when it came to painting." So much for their profound and complex association.

Mr. Mailer's principal sources are Fernande Olivier's colorful memoirs, "Picasso and His Friends" (1933) and "Souvenirs Intimes" (written in 1955 and published posthumously in 1988). Olivier lived with Picasso from 1905 until 1912. She has said that she kept diaries at the time and that her memoirs derived from them. Still, these are books written as much as 43 years after the fact, and by a former lover, which brings to mind the French saying about trying to pull the sheets to one's own side of the bed.

MR. MAILER acknowledges the problem, fretting over it himself, but relies on her stories anyway. They provide some of the book's freshest material, to be sure, since "Souvenirs Intimes" has not yet been published in English. But one should expect more of a work like this than that it translates someone else's memoirs.

And with this subject in particular, one expects more of Mr. Mailer. There is a tremendous sense of opportunity missed. He of all people would seem equipped to write a vivid and original book about Picasso, since he shares with the artist, if not the same degree of talent, then the characteristics of a long public career, prolific output, Rolodex of styles, sexual fixation, narcissism, will to power and compunction to parlay his own life into art.

Mr. Mailer's career, for better and worse, has been a project of self-mythology — assuming greatness by proxy. And his willingness to rationalize away Picasso's disregard for, even violence toward, lovers and friends will ring a bell with readers of such Mailer classics as "The Naked and the Dead" and "The White Negro." But the links between him and Picasso must be gleaned with some effort from the book. If anything, Mr. Mailer doesn't put enough of himself into it, relying on the idiosyncrasy of his prose to carry readers along. Picasso, who had no patience for art criticism, once praised Jean Genet's writing on Giacometti, which was personal and self-exploratory. It is the type of writing one hopes for from Mr. Mailer — more like "The Armies of the Night," with its blend of intense self-scrutiny and reportage, and less like his cut-and-paste "Marilyn." Mr. Mailer might have written a more distinctive book about Picasso if he had observed his own maxim: "It's impossible to truly comprehend others until one's plumbed the bottom of certain obsessions about oneself." □



ROBERT GROSSMAN

terms of Picasso's other works than by random speculation about his sex life.

Mr. Mailer also becomes fixated on the androgyny of the hulking proto-Cubist figures Picasso painted in 1906, connecting them to Gertrude Stein, whose portrait the artist was then painting. Mr. Mailer's remarks on the subject are worth quoting at length, to give a feel for his prose: "It is safe to assume that Gertrude Stein was the most monumental crossover in gender that he had ever encountered. He had to be knowing about this. With Fernande [Olivier, Picasso's mistress], he had entered the essential ambiguity of deep sex, where one's masculinity or femininity is forever turning into its opposite, so that a phallus, once enplaced within a vagina, can become more aware of the vagina than its own phallitude — that is to say, one is, at the moment, a vagina as much as a phallus, or for a woman vice versa,

and those of other artists. To be sure, he isn't alone in this. Picasso has largely been written about in terms of his biography. The exception is his Cubist period, and Mr. Mailer is right in this case to lament the "near impenetrability" of so much of the critical jargon attending it. "Cubism is not a form of lovemaking with the lights out: Cubism is compelling because it is eerie, resonant and full of the uneasy recognition that time itself is being called into question," he writes. "Some of the paintings, if we dare to entertain this vision, have the appearance of corpses, their flesh in strips and tatters, organs open."

Again, Mr. Mailer isn't the first to speculate about the emotional impact of Cubism's fractured imagery, but this is a provocative and minority viewpoint, and unfortunately he does not take it further. The collaboration of Picasso and Braque on the creation of Cubism is almost un-

PAGES

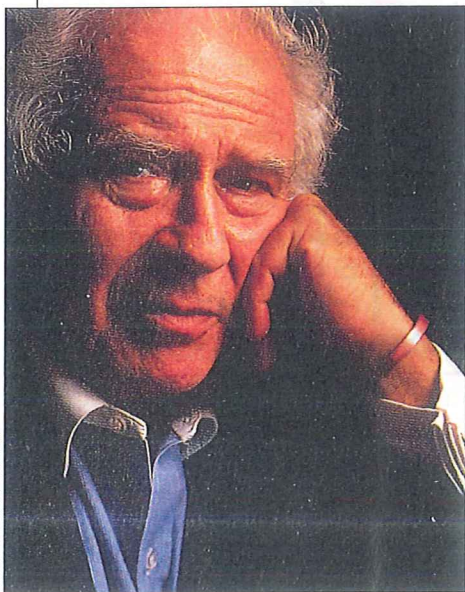
But those who expect Mailer, now 72, to dazzle with fiery polemic as he did in *The Armies of the Night* will be disappointed. Waving off conspiracy theories as mere media-hyped horsefies, Mailer stalks more philosophical—and pathological—game. His purpose, he states, is to show “that the sudden death 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.” Mailer reminds us that Oswald grew up fatherless, was bathed by his mother until the age of 12, was brilliant but severely handicapped by dyslexia, was a sly and lazy manual laborer, a wife beater and a mediocre marksman. What most intrigues is the assassin’s grandiosity. “The only matter unsettled is whether he was working for any service larger than the power centers in the privacy of his mind,” writes Mailer. Thankfully, in the second half of this hefty tome, the Mailer who can skewer with mischievous imagery finally comes roaring out of the nonfiction closet. The Warren report is “a dead whale decomposing on a beach” and “Every gun lover is a closet mystic.” Did Oswald act alone? Mailer suggests that he did. But readers of this sometimes sluggish and often rewarding investigation may be less sure. After all, the subtitle of *Oswald’s Tale* is *An American Mystery*. (Random House, \$30) ■ J.D. REED

■ OSWALD’S TALE

by Norman Mailer

Drawn again to the '60s, this time to the tragedy of Dallas in November 1963, Mailer and literary investigator-book packager Larry Schiller (who worked with the author on *The Executioner’s Song*) sift through the

magnified detritus of Lee Harvey Oswald’s life. Here, spread across nearly 800 pages, are records of previously secret KGB wiretaps from Oswald’s 1959-62 sojourn in the Soviet Union; the musings today of his still-bitter widow, Marina; the 26-volume Warren Commission report; and hundreds of voluble witnesses.



WYATT COUNTS/OUTLINE

▲ NORMAN MAILER Much ado about a man of puny character and one indelible deed.

## ReadingPlus

## Back in the fray

By Carol McCabe  
PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

**C**AMBRIDGE, Mass. — “Is that Norma Mailer with an ‘i’ or a ‘y’?” the hotel operator asked.

It could be that in 1995 Norman Mailer, author of *The Naked and the Dead* at 25, winner of two Pulitzers and the National Book Award, filmmaker, onetime candidate for mayor of New York City, lacks the name recognition of a talk-show host or mini-series actress. But his mind is still what one critic called it 25 years ago: a national resource.

The rest of his 72-year-old body must be holding up pretty well, too. At an age when few major literary figures are carrying their bags from hotel to hotel and reading their work to audiences from a dozen stages, Mailer is on the road. He visited 12 cities on behalf of his 28th book, *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*, answering the same questions over and over like some 23-year-old promoting the latest

coming-of-age novel.

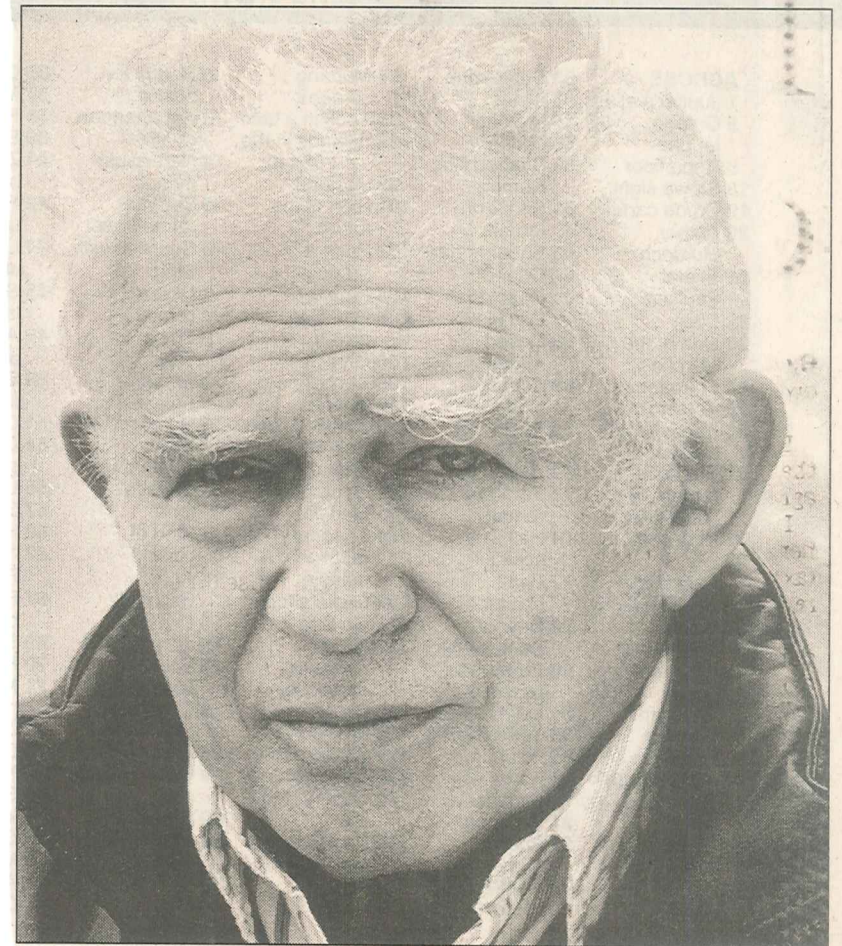
By Albany, the next-to-last stop, the cities were blurring. “It’s so lovely here we could be in Philadelphia,” he told the man from the *Times-Union*. “I feel like a pro wrestler. Do I win tonight or do I take the fall?”

Enough is enough. Visiting his alma mater, Harvard, at the end of a 12-city promotion tour, he clumped three final Boston area interviews into one hour in Cambridge. And after the hotel operator found Mailer-with-an-“i,” the trio of questioners ascended to his suite.

Mailer opened the door. His hair is white now and flossy, his tough-guy face grooved, steel-wool chest hair springing from the neck of his alligator shirt. His grip is strong.

Mailer is a man at home in arenas — boxing arenas, bullfight arenas, political arenas. His Cambridge hotel suite, trendily furnished in “Americana” — chipboard Shaker cupboards, dried hydrangeas and fake geraniums in wicker baskets — seemed too fragile a container for him.

□ The literature that Mailer has





produced is a different sort of Americana, a picture of a violent century, of dislocation and shifting values.

The ex-Marine, once known as a brawler, heavy drinker and drug taker, stabber of one of his six wives, sat somewhat gingerly in a pretend Shaker chair.

He responded to familiar questions courteously, thoughtfully, in a resonant voice flavored with New York vowels. What follows includes responses to questions from all three interviewers.

## The subject is Oswald

The subject of *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*, Mailer's first book of nonfiction in 16 years, is Lee Harvey Oswald. The misfit who killed John F. Kennedy remains an enigma 31 years — and some 2,000 books — after the event by which he finally got everyone's attention.

"I had been absolutely obsessed with Oswald," Mailer said. He hoped to understand Oswald the man and perhaps to solve, if only for himself, the great American mystery of the 20th century.

The immediate impetus was unexpected access to secret KGB documents concerning the period from 1959 to 1962 when Oswald lived in Russia. He had gone there, only 20 years old, unable to speak the language and at first too timid even to leave his hotel room. He was so weak on Russian geography that when officials there sent him to Minsk, he had to ask where it was.

Mailer's book details a mean pillar-to-post childhood from which Oswald escaped by joining the Marine Corps, only to find that there, too, he was odd man out. Although seriously dyslexic, he escaped into books, read Marx, liked the ideals of Communism. And because he was unhappy living under capitalism, he seems to have believed he would be happy living under Communism.

His arrival as a tourist in Moscow and his request to stay alerted Soviet authorities, who assumed he must be a U.S. spy. They maintained increasingly baffled surveillance on him throughout his time there, even tape recording his bedroom con-

**'I hate obsession. It just consists of putting more energy into the same question. When I was younger, I used to (ask), 'Am I a good man or not?' That's a terrible question. It's very wasteful.'**

— Norman Mailer

versations with Marina, the tough Russian woman he married. Their records show no evidence that he was a U.S. plant.

Mailer and his associate, Lawrence Schiller, spent six months in the former Soviet Union following Oswald's footsteps, interviewing dozens of people who had come in contact with the future assassin. Later, Mailer went to Texas to interview Oswald's widow.

## Fascination with a type

Schiller was also Mailer's collaborator on *The Executioner's Song*, the Pulitzer-winning story of killer Gary Gilmore, a figure with some resemblance to Oswald. Both were soreheads, outsiders, rebels against the status quo, hungry for control and some measure of importance, no matter how negative.

Thanks to Mailer's superb book and to Mikal Gilmore's 1994 account of his brother's life, Gary Gilmore has come alive in print.

In an interview distributed by Random House, his publisher, Mailer said, "I ended up finding (Oswald) much more interesting than I thought I would." But despite all Mailer's efforts, after 800 pages, Lee Harvey Oswald still seems not very interesting, a nonentity, a cipher and, to one reviewer, "a cockroach."

"What is this passion everyone has to make him small and meaningless, a nonentity?" Mailer asked. "When a guy has guts, I never look on him as a nonentity. . . . Some people who are desperate just slowly collapse and die young. Others who are desperate try things. This guy tried it."

Oswald spent his Marine Corps savings to get to Russia and ran out of money while waiting for

approval to stay. "He went over there and he's a weak, pathetic figure," Mailer said. "It was like he used all his courage to get there and then it collapsed. Then slowly he (regained) his courage over a couple of years . . . slowly he gets repelled by life in the Soviet Union and decides to go back (to the U.S.). So he takes on both bureaucracies. . . . Finally they decided to let him go back."

Oswald persuaded the U.S. embassy to admit his wife and their daughter along with him, Mailer said. "It took stick-to-itiveness. . . . He's got guts."

Which is not to say that Mailer found Oswald altogether admirable. "He was also the failed husband, the bad worker. . . . He's a complex figure. . . . I think he had a bad character. He was a psychopathic liar, a brute with his wife.

"I think he is a tragic figure, not a tragic hero," Mailer said in response to a different question. "He's an anti-hero if anything. What's an anti-hero? Someone who goes in for large ventures and makes a mess of them. . . . I think he wanted to be a hero and he absolutely failed at that."

## Oswald online

Had Oswald not killed Kennedy or himself been shot dead by Jack Ruby, if he were alive today, what would he be doing? Would he be a member of a militia? Would he be on the Internet?

"He would be on the Internet, sending out all kinds of manifestoes. He had a political program; he was a libertarian. Both kinds of government were wrong; he wanted no government at all.

"Militia? I think he liked the idea of killing people one by one,

## Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery

By Norman Mailer, Random House, 828 pgs., \$30

not . . ."

The end of Mailer's response was drowned by another interviewer's voice. Presumably he could have said, "not 167 at a time." Something like that.

"Are you still an obsessive person?"

"I try not to be. Nothing's more wasteful. I hate obsession. It just consists of putting more energy into the same question. When I was younger, I used to (ask), 'Am I a good man or not?' That's a terrible question. It's very wasteful."

He regrets other energy dissipated. During the '60s, "I was wasting a lot of time, getting into a lot of capers, into troubles of one sort and another, drinking too much and killing a lot of writing I could have done. I think that over the years I've gotten more or less in shape. Much more disciplined now."

What's next? Another CIA novel, a sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*? Mailer's answer was a quick

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## Oswald's Tale

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reminder that he is no longer the kid who wrote *The Naked and the Dead*.

Writing takes a lot out of you, he said. "I've been writing about fighters all my life. And I've finally come to understand old fighters. Old fighters don't like tough fights. (Tough fights) kill you. (Old fighters') bodies have taken a beating from which they can't recover. Writing is like that. Too much anxiety. It just eats up your guts."