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LITERATURE

ASK, and you shall

Norman Mailer adds intellectual heft to camp for conspiracy-minded

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A banquet hall full of people straining and squinting to read each other's laminated name tag is a typical scene at any convention. It's just that at most conventions, people are trying to read where you're from, who you work for, while at the Assassination Symposium on John F. Kennedy (ASK) being held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel through Sunday, people are trying to see who you think did it.

It was a scene Thursday night that created the opportunity for a whole new range of conversational gambits and pick-up lines, as when a 40-ish man carrying some thickly stuffed folders and a banged-up tape recorder sat down next to a woman and said, "I see you think Richard Nixon was behind it. That's an interesting choice. I didn't put anyone down because I never want to lose sight of the bigger picture. I mean, so many people want to oversimplify things." "Oh, I know just what you mean," the woman agreed effusively. And on they went, love among the conspiracies.

There were a lot of sparks flying around ASK's third gathering of Kennedy assassination theorists, hobbyists and buffs, and the most immediate reason was anticipation of the keynote speaker, Nor-

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receive an earful

man Mailer.

The appearance of one of America's great literary figures is emblematic of the increasing prestige and credibility the movement enjoys coming up on the 30th anniversary of The Day. The more general reason is the heightened atmosphere generated by nearly 600 people who have devoted much of their adult lives to the investigation of the Kennedy assassination.

When, shortly before Mr. Mailer appeared, a man started yelling out over the crowd, "If you want to know what the CIA and FBI have been covering up for 30 years come to the Texas Theater tomorrow night," people didn't strain to ignore him, or look around for a security guard. They turned to face him and called back, "What time, what time?"

Having long displayed a fascination for the circles spinning out from the Kennedy assassination, Mr. Mailer may also have been prompted to appear by his ongoing work on a book about Lee Harvey Oswald. He spoke at length about this "mightiest mountain of mystery in the 20th century," this "largest paranoid myth of our times," this "national obsession." He observed how the assassination forced each of us into either apathy or obsession and noted that Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone was the answer we feared the most.

At a pay phone outside the banquet room after the speech, a young man spoke excitedly into the receiver. "Yeah, Norman Mailer just spoke. He was great. And guess what? My room overlooks Dealey Plaza — it's so cool."