

## JONATHAN YARDLEY

### *Taking the Measure of Mailer*

**S**o here is Norman Mailer, three-quarters of a century old, celebrating the half-century anniversary of his famous first novel, "The Naked and the Dead." Those are big milestones, and toasts are in order. So, too, is an honest appraisal of Mailer's work and, more to the point, his influence.

The temptation to be dismissive if not downright snide is extremely strong, bordering on irresistible. Mailer, author of "Advertisements for Myself," is the most shameless self-promoter in 20th-century American literature, indeed has been considerably more accomplished at self-advertisement than at writing, his ostensible life's work. Strutting on the stage that New York's literati have provided for him, oozing cock-of-the-walk pugnacity and juvenile conceit, he demands not the reverence and awe he so clearly desires but ridicule and scorn.

Still, a half-century of literary labor cannot be taken lightly, even if the persona behind it is something less than fetching. Mailer has written many books, and even if most are bad—monumentally bad, in some cases—they add up to a considerable life's work. It is an accomplishment of no mean order that despite all the distractions (largely of his own making) with which he has been surrounded, he has stuck to his last. In a literary culture that bestows early fame and then inflicts early burnout, Mailer has kept on keeping on. This is honorable and deserves applause.

It scarcely seems likely, though, that the work of Mailer's career will long command such interest and respect as it is now accorded. This is the judgment of a reader who has subjected himself to a great deal of Mailer over the years, almost none of which has provided pleasure or enrichment. This has to do in part with Mailer's baroque, look-at-me prose style, in part with his repellent self-absorption, in part with a genuine lack of curiosity on my own part

about too many of the subjects to which Mailer is attracted, in part with a strong sense that at heart Mailer is a frivolous rather than a serious man.

Readers more charitably disposed toward Mailer and his work will argue for "The Naked and the Dead," though James Jones's "The Thin Red Line" is a better novel about combat in World War II; or for "The Executioner's Song," though Truman Capote cornered that market with "In Cold Blood"; or for "The Armies of the Night" and the rest of Mailer's journalism, though Hunter Thompson's is more penetrating and infinitely more amusing. Sorry about that; it would be gentlemanly to honor Mailer's big anniversaries with a more enthusiastic judgment, but there you have it.

Where Mailer is likely to live on in American literature is not in his own words but in those of others. He has been, for better and for worse, one of the powerful literary and journalistic influences of our time, and probably will remain so long after he has gone to whatever awaits him in the next world. His touch is to be seen all around us, not so much in the way we write—mercifully, the age of Mailer imitations has come and gone—but in what we write about.

In this Mailer recalls two other (and better) writers whose influence outweighs their own accomplishments. Ring Lardner's work is too little known now, save among connoisseurs of baseball journalism and the short story, but in his use of the vernacular he taught Americans how to write the same language that they speak, a lesson certain to endure so long as there are Americans who speak and Americans who write. By the same token the fiction of Ernest Hemingway has revealed itself as mannered and empty of thematic weight, but in stripping his prose down to its barest essentials, Hemingway liberated American writing from the ornate reticence of the Victorian era.

Mailer's accomplishment has been to

bestow a measure of literary respectability on journalism. Until he came along it had always been assumed (usually with good reason) that journalism was a raffish business beneath either the notice or the contempt of serious writers, but Mailer changed that. Never mind that little of his fiction had deserved the acclaim bestowed upon it; he was regarded as a serious literary man, and when he decided to do journalism, albeit in his own fashion, suddenly the better sort of folk had to grant journalism a new respectability.

As it happens, Mailer did dreadful things to journalism. He had little interest in facts, in hard reporting, and much interest in interpretation, the foggier the better; the results are now all too widely evident in the American daily press, as well as in other journalism of a putatively "higher" order. Even worse, he insisted that the writer be at the center of the piece, and thus encouraged inferior writers—of whom the world has always had an ample supply—to write not about the news or about other people but about themselves. The deleterious effects this has had on American nonfiction surely need no elaboration.

But in legitimizing nonfiction, Mailer did us a favor. He came along at an hour when the American novel was starting to founder on self-indulgence and autobiographical self-infatuation. Like Capote, Mailer understood that it was possible to write seriously and in a literary way—or at least try to do so—within the confines of journalism. Although no direct progression can be delineated, there can be little doubt that the heights achieved by certain "mere" journalists—J. Anthony Lukas, David McCullough, Joan Didion, Taylor Branch—were built on the foundation that Mailer laid.

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