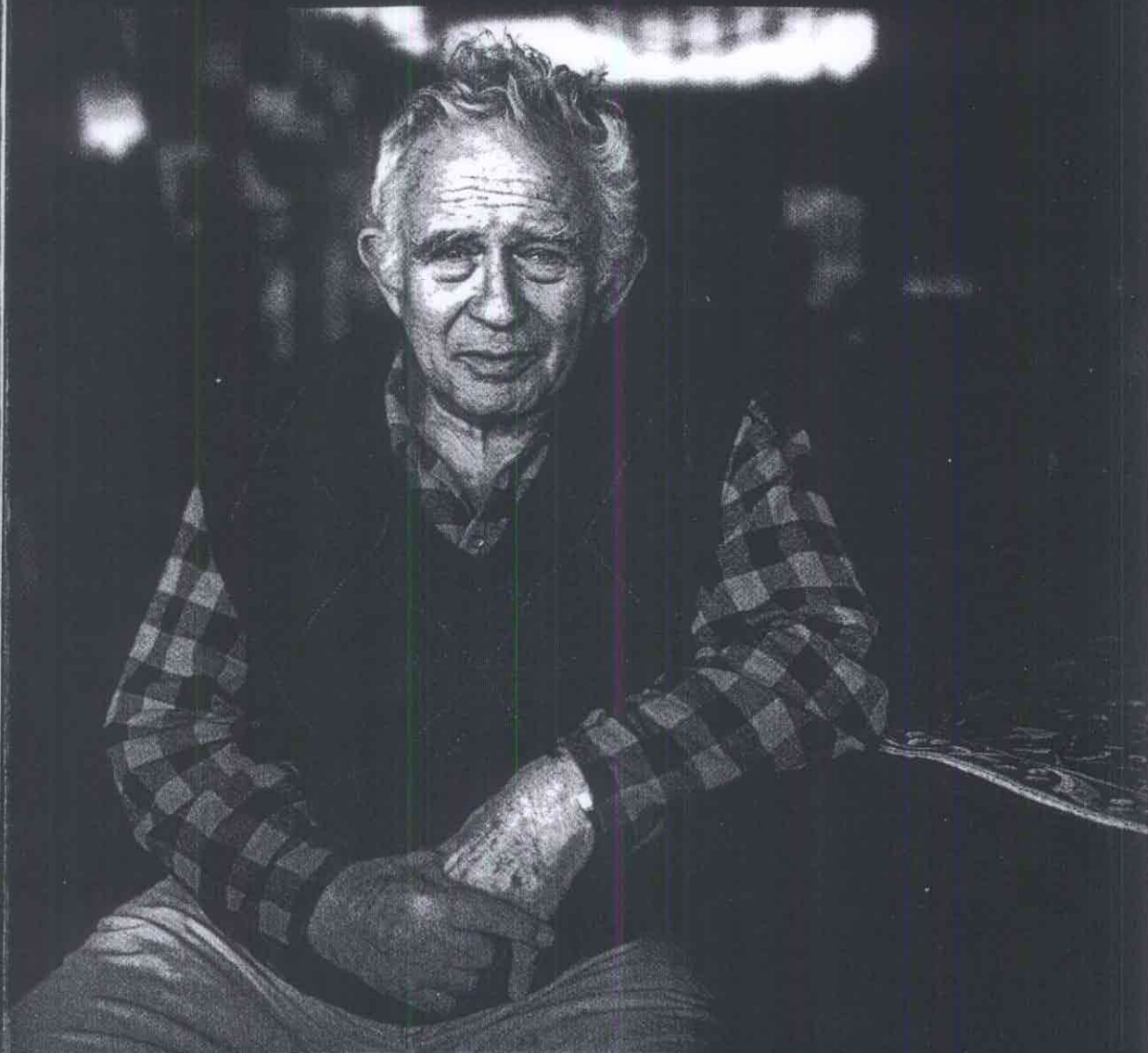


COMPLIMENTARY

AT RANDOM

No. 11

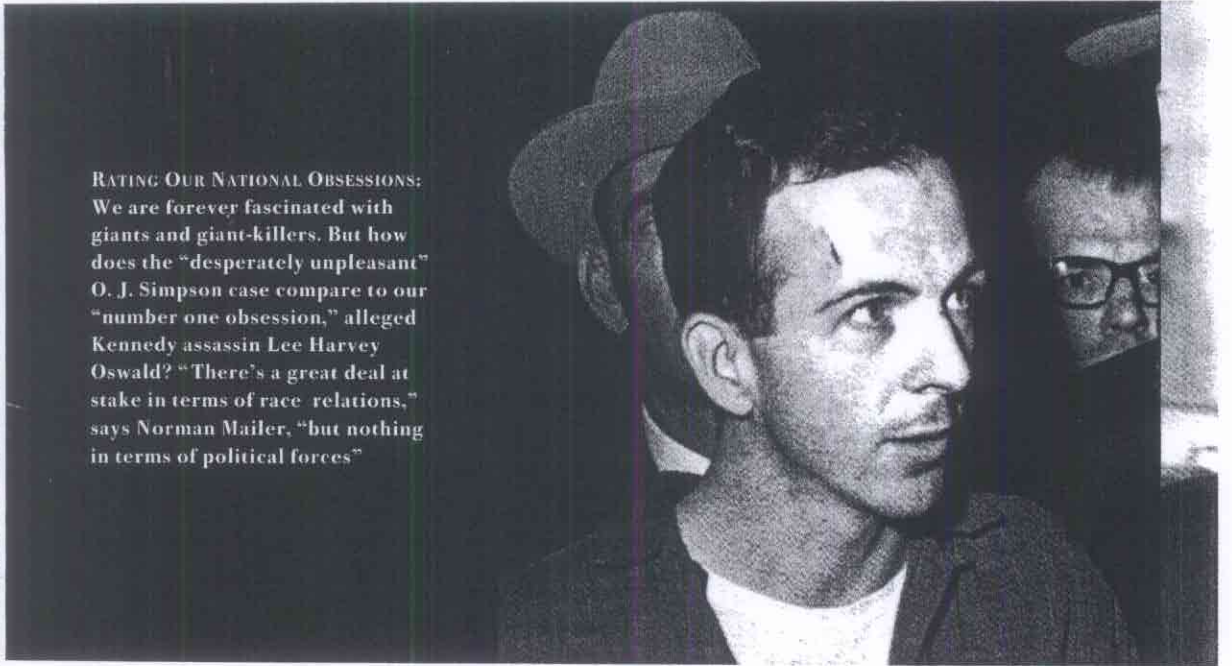
BOOKS AND BOOKPEOPLE FROM RANDOM HOUSE • SUMMER 1995



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

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 —

It 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,



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.

[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'?"



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

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

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

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 mean-spirited times?

NM: Oh, we do. Meanspirited times. I can't remember a period that's as mean-spirited 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

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

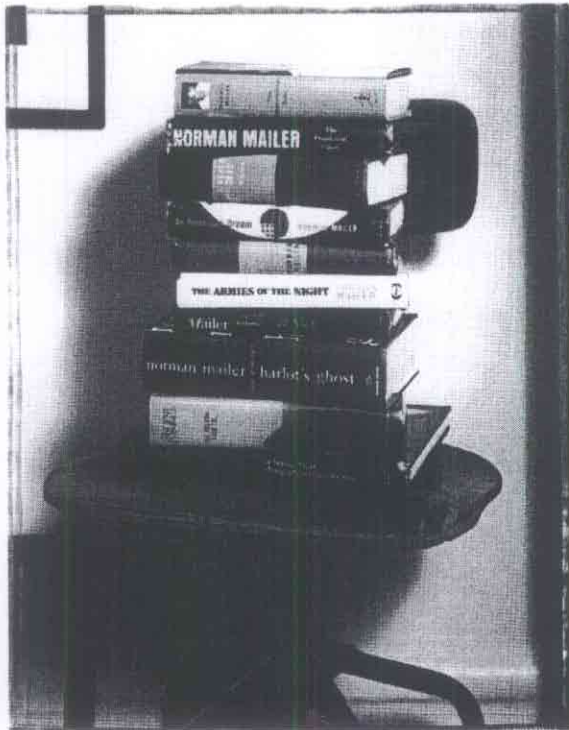
Oswald invent the dangerous loner for us?

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*.