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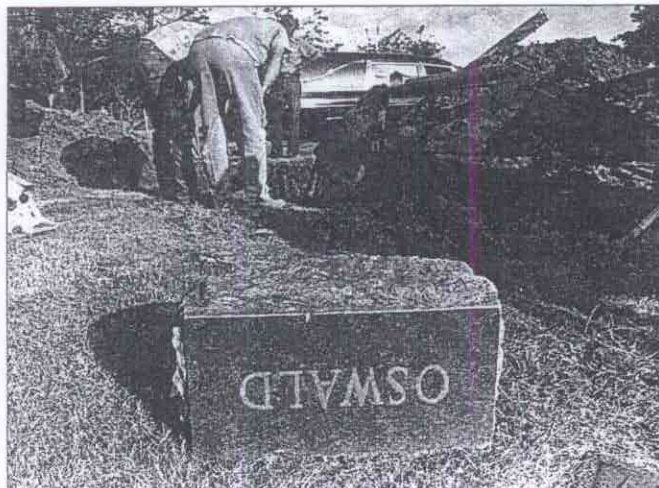
By William T. Vollmann

**Oswald's Tale:
An American Mystery**
By Norman Mailer
Random House, \$30

I am just barely old enough to remember the Kennedy assassination. When the news came over the radio my mother had just picked me up from nursery school. We were on the freeway in a traffic jam and the radio was on and my mother was crying. In all the other cars that I could see around me, people were crying. This is what I remember—or what I think I remember; for after I had finished writing a brief story about this in one of my books, after I had gotten the phrases right, the actual lantern slide that I had behind my eyes is gone. I projected it too much; the bulb of artifice faded and bleached it.

Such a phenomenon becomes more pronounced with the importance of the event remembered and with one's own proximity to it. Interviewing Pol Pot's brother in 1991, I found his answers to be as trickles of muddy water flowing through their own ruts. And this is the difficulty that Norman Mailer had in approaching his own witnesses three decades after Dallas. About his conversation with Marina Oswald he writes: "Ghosts seeped into her mind like poison vapors in a horror film. . . . She can hardly remember her old testimony. . . . Since evidence is a blur to her, she soon will say that she cannot be certain what she believes."

This would not have been a problem to some epic bard. Let the picture fade! The original seers died; the fossil artifact remained to sparkle and jingle, all nicely shimmed up with kennings or their equivalents. But the written word creates its own desire for introspection and immediacy. And now with tape recorders and video cameras, we don't want the Beautiful Thing anymore; we want to know What Really Happened, which means videotaping all the other guys' pictures for us to rewind and manipulate forever. And if we don't yet have the technology to do exactly that, at least we can drill a hole in the guy's ceiling, drop in a microphone, and listen to what the KGB calls his "intimate and tender moments" with his wife. One of several amazing things about *Oswald's Tale* is that we can actually read some of the transcripts of



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private conversations between Lee and Marina Oswald in their bugged apartment in Minsk:

WIFE: Alka, do you hate me when you yell at me?
LHO: Yes.
WIFE: Yes?
LHO: Yes.
WIFE: . . . Why are you afraid of people? What scared you?
LHO: (yells angrily) Shut up, shut up. . . . You stand there and blah.

The interest of this to a reader is less the content than the circumstances. Whose private quarrels would not seem pathetic and banal? But, although Oswald never says or does anything particularly spectacular in these transcripts (and what could he do? Plot to kill JFK, who as Mailer points out wasn't elected yet? Steal nuclear secrets? Gobble caviar out of Russian girls' cunts?), we want to gaze over his dirty laundry in this way (and dirty laundry is in fact one of the many issues over which he and Marina argued in Minsk)—because he is Oswald, and Oswald has become a public figure. Here are new pictures of What Really Happened. But what do they say about Oswald? How do they advance our understanding of him? This is, after all, the project of Mailer's quasi-novelistic biography. He writes:

In perusing the first twelve volumes of the House Select Committee on Assassinations Hearings and the full twenty-six volumes of the Warren Commission Hearings and Exhibits. . . one began to feel that one could do better than know Oswald, one might even understand him. To know a man, after all, is to do no more than predict what he will do next, even if you do not have a clue as to why he does it; but to understand a person is to comprehend his reasons for action. The conceit arose that one understood Oswald.


In this sense of understanding, Mailer's book is successful, not only on its own merits but also because there may not be that much to understand. Oswald has been conscientiously portrayed so many times before, after all; and Mailer's version of him, his literary character called Oswald (and the way one understands a character in a book is by getting to know him, which is one of the reasons for long books such as this one), is not at such a great remove from the Oswald in, say, De Lillo's *Libra*. Oh, Mailer has done what he could, made some shrewd decisions—for instance, he elected to correct the man's dyslexic spellings, so that he no longer seems subnormally dull—but broadly speaking he is the same dreary

old Oswald, joyless, selfish, hysterical, a wife beater, a would-be Napoleon out of his depth, a loveless, love-needing loser. So when Mailer tries to "comprehend his reasons" for action, the answer he comes up with, a desperate need for recognition, for fame, for being somebody other than Oswald, it rings unremarkably true. This particular connotation of understanding does not and cannot help us address the operational question of whether Oswald acted alone—and for the most part, Mailer, who is no forensicist, wisely stays away from that issue; his few attempts to touch on it are pro forma and tedious.

As a matter of fact, a good 20 percent of this book is tedious. Sometimes it is not Mailer's fault. How do you write the biography of someone whose biography everybody knows? If a hundred years from now somebody who knows nothing about Kennedy picks up Mailer's book first, then a good number of other books about the assassination will also seem more boring than they are. Secondly, there is the unavoidable fact that Oswald's dismal life would give anyone a sense of ennui. But Mailer has made matters worse. The second half of the book, which takes place in the U.S.A., does frequently bristle with authorial insights into motivations, but too often he reshapes old sources, in

particular Priscilla Johnson McMillan's biography *Marina and Lee*. Mailer's interviews with Marina Oswald are of considerable interest. But a strange problem with them (strange because of the kind of writer Mailer usually is) is: not enough Mailer! Sad to say, this is true throughout the book. Given the necessarily bureaucratic origin of so many of his documentary sources both Soviet and American, I believe that Mailer made a bad decision in overusing the passive voice: "Stepan was asked why then had Igor Ivanovich reacted so strongly as to say, 'Everyone blames me,' but Stepan indicated that Igor was a more sensitive person than he was." Then there are ad nauseam extracts from Oswald's letters to and from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow when he was trying to leave Russia. More disappointing still, there are few detailed descriptions of people and places in this book. I had expected more from the author of that cinematic masterpiece *The Naked and the Dead*. There is an interesting description of the daily routine of one of Oswald's KGB observers (one can't call him Oswald's controller, since our murderer doesn't ever seem to have been an agent). But I think this would have enriched the book more if it had been used here and there to add color to the observer's study of Oswald, instead of being left like an isolated raisin in a too bland pudding.

These blemishes, while they mar the stylistic beauty of the book, do not in the least take away Mailer's accomplishment of "understanding." It is especially fascinating to read in one place the reactions of Oswald's friends, acquaintances, and spooks in Minsk when they learned that he had shot the president. Marina Oswald, her aunt Valida, and Oswald's mother Maguerite are brought alive wonderfully, and their thoughts on the subject of the biography enrich him more than he deserves. In reading this book, particularly the Minsk part, I was continually surprised at what a charming impression Oswald could make on people. They liked him; they loved him; they thought he was nice. . . . at least until they got to know him better. Back in the States, Oswald had a gift for impressing people at job interviews (later he'd become abstracted and surly, until he'd have to be fired). This makes sense, for after all, like many a psychopath, Oswald acted upon people; he did not care about them. He seems not to have been able to think through the effects of his own behavior. As Mailer remarks: "It may never have occurred to Oswald that the obfuscation and paranoia which followed the assassination of Kennedy would contribute immensely to the sludge and smog of the world's spirit." ■



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