

FROM "THE MORONIC
INFERNO" BY MARTIN
AMIS, VIKING 1987.

Mailer: The Avenger and the Bitch

The year was 1955. At thirty-two, Norman Mailer was the celebrated and reviled author of three novels, and a notorious brawler, sage and drunk. By his own admission, he was at this point arrogant, terrified, greedy, spoilt – and galvanised on marijuana.

Q. Do you feel that age will mould you into a high-priced please-the-public author?

A. I doubt it, but I also know that exhaustion of the will can come to anyone.

It would be tempting, here in 1981, to pounce on the young Mailer's stoned foreboding. His latest money-spinner, *Of Women and Their Elegance*, has taken a pummelling from the American press and is due for a torrid time of it over here. With its terrible title (that 'Of' somehow guaranteeing the vulgarity of the enterprise), its irrelevant photographs and coffee-table packaging, the volume seems to boast its own vulnerability to attack. As you flap through its slippery pages, you find that it is Mailer's second book about Marilyn Monroe, and his third book running about the recently dead and their sex lives (its immediate predecessor was *The Executioner's Song*, the story of the murderer Gary Gilmore, who demanded death by firing squad in 1977). What happened to the man who has said – loud and often – that he hoped 'to dare a new art of the brave'? Clearly it is time for some revision of Mailer's American dream.

Now, at fifty-seven, Mailer has accumulated six wives and eight (or maybe nine) children. He is obliged to earn over \$400,000 a year to

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stay abreast of alimony and tuition fees. Last year his summer house was confiscated by the taxmen. He has received, and spent, a \$635,000 advance on an unwritten novel. And he is still half a million dollars in debt.

In his three-storey brownstone apartment in Brooklyn Heights, overlooking New York Harbor and the Dunhill lighters of Manhattan, Mailer perched on a stiff-backed chair, and told me to sit on the old velvet sofa. 'I can't sit on a soft chair. I writhe around a lot. Hurts my back,' he said with an apologetic wince.

The battered but comfortable apartment feels like a ship. A pulley system leads to the upper floors. Mailer used to have a crow's-nest office at the top; the once-vigorous author would clamber up a rope to begin the day's work. Now he goes to a rented office down the street, trudging back for lunch. Children of alarmingly various ages had gathered for their supper in the dining area. Mailer's sixth wife, the dark-eyed model and actress Norris Church ('she's half my age and twice my height'), sat imposingly near by, reading a buxom magazine.

His face is more delicate and less pugnacious than you would expect, the body more rounded, dapper and diminutive. The tangled hair is white but plentiful, the frequent smile knowing but unreserved. Despite his long history of exhibitionism, he no longer enjoys giving interviews. You can sense him wondering how much of his charm he will need to disclose.

Mailer watched wistfully as I feasted on my drink. 'It's the terrible price you have to pay,' he said, referring to his own eight-month abstinence. 'The day just wasn't long enough, and I have to work so hard now, to make the money. My nerves have been pretty well encrusted by booze, thank God. It's okay. It just means there's nothing to look forward to at the end of the day.'

'Thanks a lot,' said Norris. 'What about me?'

'No, the sex is great. The fucking's great. I just miss it, that's all.'

This reminded me of another sacrifice Mailer has been forced to make. He has always argued that any act of sex is invalid, corrupt, soul-endangering, etc., if the chance of conception has been ruled out. 'I've got eight kids,' said Mailer. 'I can't afford to believe that any more . . . My hopes and expectations have changed. I no longer feel prepared to go to the wall for any big ideas.'

'Have you mellowed', I asked cautiously, '- or what?'

'Not really. Let's say I've adjusted to circumstances. At last.'

Well, it has been a long haul. This is and half-impressions flash past - who mayor, who butted Gore Vidal, who who went on TV in his boxing trunks, who fought Lelchuck that when he got through with him but a hank of hair and some fillings'.

This is the Existential Hero, the Philistine Pig, the Psychic Investigator, the Mailer has been the cosseted superb man taken him quite a while to grow up. A fascinating spectacle.

'Early success - that was the worst thing that happened to me.' A bright Jewish high school graduate, Norman went off to fight in World War II. Showing that mixture of recklessness and courage that marked his entire career, Mailer had the material for the Great American Novel. A brave but clumsy soldier, he survived to Brooklyn, and wrote *The Naked and the Fearful*.

Before publication Mailer left for Europe with Beatrice. Calling in at the American Express, he was handed what amounted to a check for \$100,000. An American express! Number-one best-selling translation rights sold, Norman, given the fact that well, Mailer would write in *Adventures in Paradise* an average man's experience'.

Early acclaim won't harm a writer's career, cynicism, not to believe in that accident and is perhaps only now recovering from it. Norman was very young, the success was very good. Reading *The Naked and the Fearful* Mailer's precocious sense of humanity took a step further into the extremities of the human condition, and, above all, by his ability to listen to the needs of America. The novel was impossible to come.

It is hard to imagine the kind of man Mailer's. After an equivalent success, he gave up his job as a schoolmaster, o-

of the book show irreproachable artistry in their re-creation of the locales and loners of middle America; but then Mailer lets the story run away with him, and his reliance on transcripts, tapes and reports finally dishes its artistic claims. Once again, the fatal yearning for monumentality: Norman keeps overplaying his hand with the Great Bitch.

'I don't know, maybe it was too long,' he now admits. 'Since I started needing all this money,' he says, and in such a way that you know he has said it before, 'I've written twice as many books as I should have done, and maybe they've only been half as good as they should have been.'

Mailer is a well-liked figure among the New York literati: there is much protective affection for the loud-mouth and tantrum-specialist whom they have indulged for so long. 'Oh, I like Norman,' was the typical response of one Madison Avenue publisher. 'I mean, I wouldn't want to room with him next year ... but he's good to have around.' It seems that every MA in Manhattan has his Mailer story: 'Then he smashed this window ... Then he loafed this guy ... Then he grabbed this bottle ...' But he is spoken of with the reverence customarily accorded to people who live harder than most of us do.

It is always possible that Mailer's best work is yet to come. Age is currently doing a good job on his infinite variety. Although his writing in the Fifties seemed prescient, Mailer's ideas solidified in the Sixties, despite his attempts to get interested in ecology, graffiti, the Yippies, and what not. He seems well-poised to make some sort of reconciliation with his own limits. Money worries constrain him now; but eventually the wives will remarry, and the kids will all grow up. Then the Avenger might get his piece of the Great American Bitch — or, in language more appropriate to his years, Mailer might write the novels that are in him.

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In the Belly of the Beast, the book that sprang Jack Henry Abbott from jail, played a key part in putting him back inside. All last week, the State Supreme Court had the carnival atmosphere which New York reserves for its celebrity murder trials. Through a gauntlet of