

The New York Times Book Review

MARCH 14, 1965

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Published weekly by The New York Times Company, Times Square, New York, N. Y. 10036, \$7.50 a year; Canada, \$8.20; other foreign countries, \$8.90. Second-class postage paid at New York, N. Y. Vol. LXX—No. 11

A MAN DESPERATE FOR A NEW LIFE

AN AMERICAN DREAM. By Norman Mailer. 270 pp. New York: The Dial Press. \$4.95.

By CONRAD KNICKERBOCKER

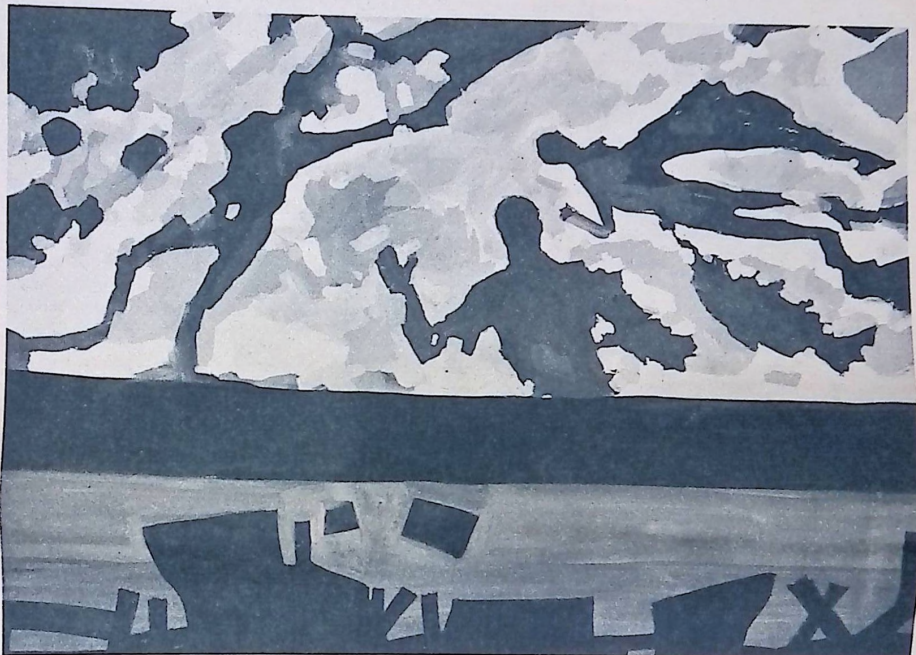
IN "An American Dream," his first novel in 10 years, Norman Mailer burns his remaining bridges. He tells a sometimes bizarre, always violent, absolutely contemporary story of evil, death, and strange hope. Reading it is like flying an airplane with the instruments cross-wired; I'm not sure I liked the experience, but I'll remember it for a long time.

It's such a vulnerable book. What wrenching innocence, what cool nerve, to write melodrama in the Age of Herzog! They'll carve it to pieces, as they have so much of Mailer's work, not for what it is, but for what it is not. If only, they'll say, if only his characters had not already fallen so far toward the bottom of the pit. (If only Eitel, the script writer in "The Deer Park," had been more like Monroe Stahr or Augie March or Huck Finn or whomever they wanted characters to be like at the moment.) If only Norman would behave. If only Rojack in "An American Dream" had written a sweet Jewish letter to himself instead of killing his wife, we could forgive Mailer and give him our Mafia kiss, ignoring the possibility that melodrama might be our most natural medium.

Yes, and if only America had a literary conscience, Norman Mailer would be its accusing specter. More than anything else, he needs what no writer in this country can find despite how much we kid ourselves: a cohesive, sensitive audience, instead of splinter groups, to pit himself against. His is now the desperation of a man shouting to a hurrying crowd on a street corner. He might have been happier as one of those half-crazy wandering poets who exalted Irish villagers 200 years ago, singing of Cuchulain and the death of heroes; or a medicine man on the banks of the Pedernales, incanting the seasons, armed with the absolute power of curses; someone the crowd believed in and listened to.

Instead he wrote a big novel that said what modern war is really like and wrote a couple of other novels that were a lot better and will last

Mr. Knickerbocker frequently reviews fiction in these pages. He is at work on a biography of the late Malcolm Lowry.



Painting by John Hultberg. Hinkhouse Collection of Contemporary Art, Coe College. Courtesy Martha Jackson Gallery. "Demonic forces electronically amplified."

longer than anyone predicted at the time. He tried and discarded the various agendas of the day, but thought hard, and wrote some brilliant commentary, sometimes because the things going on were so much more astonishing than fiction. This is the kind of man the nation endows with slightly less charisma than it affords to Tuesday Weld. No wonder he sometimes pops like a 10-cent fire cracker when he intended to go off like a time bomb.

CONSIDER the stakes, quick success, earned almost too easily, followed by the struggle to come to terms with it and with his abilities. How to live with all of that and with the peculiar nature of the fame we confer. He became full of kinks, obsessive, eccentric, exhibitionistic, but also bold, dazzling, concerned, unfashionable. He summed up the whole tough luck. Enemies of promise were kicking down the doors day and night. No other writer still alive has

had it quite that bad. Rather than submitting to the slow gladiator's death that always wins the most cheers (lengthy defeats hypnotize us), he kept going. For these reasons I think he is one of the few really interesting writers anywhere.

Despite its surface extremities, but because of the intensity and relevance of Mailer's own experience, "An American Dream" defines the important themes. It fails as an affirmation of sane alternatives, but perhaps we are beyond these. Mailer is obsessed with the cabala of American power. He searches for the mana, the magics, submerged and hideous, that move the age. He strips skin to show the primitive muscle in the American rituals of authority and prestige. He sees a world in which demonic forces, electronically and typographically amplified, are a storm compared to the manageable spirits that lingered beyond the circle of tribal campfires. The hope of a different kind of life,

or the lack of hope—that is why some of us continue to read fiction. Mailer discusses the possibilities on his own terms in his own voice. Never mind the occasional literary nostalgia, the existential veneer, the chiaroscuro. I hear him, achingly so much a part of us in so many ways we are loath to accept.

Stephen Richards Rojack, the hero of "An American Dream," bereft of his magics of manhood and image, is desperate for a new life. He has returned from the war a hero with a Distinguished Service Cross to become, at the age of 26, a public figure and Congressman, just as the author, at about the same age after the success of "The Naked and the Dead," found himself to his great confusion "a node in a new electronic landscape of celebrity, personality and status." Telling himself he is fleeing from the sense of death that came to him through the blue eyes of one of the German soldiers he killed, Ro- (Continued on Page 36)

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A New Life

(Continued from Page 1)

jack commits political suicide by running on the 1948 Progressive party ticket. (Mailer had a fling at radical politics during his exploration of availabilities beyond the status quo.) Rojack had realized that his public personality was being created by just that, the public, with all the frightful cosmetic apparatus it commands. He feels himself to be an actor, the worst doom, just as Sergius O'Shaughnessy, the narrator of "The Deer Park," had always thought of himself as a spy and a fake.

Unable to summon the mana that a political career demands, Rojack retreats to another kind of image-making. He teaches existential psychology at a New York university, writes a popular book entitled "The Psychology of the Hangman," and interviews addicts on television. He becomes a face.

Yet so strong remains his fascination with the handmaidens of power that he has also become the husband of an heiress, Deborah Caughlin Mangaravidi Kelly, a Great Bitch whose raw-meat requirement is unconditional surrender. Self-trapped and empty at the end of a descending road, Rojack cries, "Let me be not all dead," and begins to find his way toward another horizon.

HIS route is to murder his wife, one of the few murders to figure crucially in a serious work of American fiction since "An American Tragedy." Mailer intends "An American Dream" to be a sequel 40 years after. But while Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths languishes, a passive victim of the system to the last, Rojack finds the beginnings of liberation in his deed. Mailer believes that to discover new circuits is the necessary recourse of a man whose switchboard has been sabotaged. Acts that place the individual beyond the point of no return may be the only ones that break barriers. Hemmed in by the safety rails of "social welfare and psychoanalysis," Rojack does not want to be adjusted; he wants to be alive.

Murder ups the ante. The police are suspicious, but through pure dumb luck he stays out of jail. Parallel to his encounter with the law runs his brief affair with Cherry, a tarnished nightclub singer who is as at home with impending death as most ladies are with the P.T.A. Finally, his New York life in ruins, he hits the road in the classic denouement of the American dream, redresses balances in Las Vegas, where all justice is served, and then heads south across the border.

Mailer manhandles the reader straight through the plate glass into the center of the event.

(Continued on Page 38)



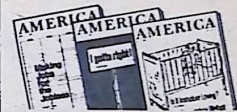
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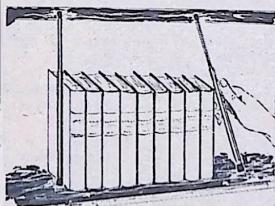
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A New Life

(Continued from Page 36)

Things that happen, he tells us, are real; only dreams and hallucinations are in doubt. We protest; life and art cannot be this excessive. Their design cannot be as vicious, exotic and random as this, nor as dangerous. But late at night, dozing over the front page or on a crowded street, one confronts the full menace of what Mailer describes.

Beneath the glare of events, “An American Dream” beats with the pulse of some huge night carnivore. It defines the American style by presenting the most extreme of our realities—murder, love and spirit strangulated, the corruption of power and the powerful, the sacrifice of self to image, all of it mixmastered in booze and heat-and-serve sex, giving off the smell of burning rubber to the sound of sirens.

At the end, no one stands with Rojack. The tough guys, the Sutton Place hosts, gossip columnists, television finks, swingers and dolls, timid college presidents and self-revulsed cops, all the hangers-on waiting for the action are gone. He must learn to make his own center alone. The structure always takes; it never gives. Yet Rojack survives, just as the men of “The Naked and the Dead” endured because there were certain limits they would not go beyond. As appealing as the idea of flight is to Mailer (O'Shaughnessy fled California to Mexico), the strongholds of power hold him; Rojack will probably return. Here, as at the end of “The Deer Park,” the author's imagination falters. He would like to believe that flight brings another chance, a new life—but he knows it does not, at least for people as entangled as Rojack.

MAILER will never write a novel about an ordinary man who missed the boat. His characters are all direct extensions of the main contemporary style: hard, doing each other in, engaged in illicit psychic traffic. Auto-erotic priests of the power-prestige-profit trinity, his people operate; they all still have mana of a twisted kind.

None is as first sees. Deborah peels like a rotten onion. Socialite luncheoners and sponsor of charity balls, she also has the sexual tastes of the fat girl in a Mexican whore house; beyond that, incest, perhaps espionage—the perfect dilettante of the 1960's. Ruth, her sneaky German maid, must have attended charm school with Ilse Koch. Deborah's father, Barney Kelly, has memorized the grimoire of business success. He commands an assassin's heart and the skill to use money like a rapier. With General Cummings of “The Naked and the Dead,”

(Continued on Page 39)

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A New Life

(Continued from Page 38)

Hollingsworth of "Barbary Shore," Herman Teppis and Marion Faye of "The Deer Park," these characters stand as vivid caryatids, pillars of hell, semblances of our times more true than most.

Mailer has evolved a rhetoric that moves far beyond his original naturalistic endowments. His words always hinge on the event, but he gives perspective to events with a kinetic poetry that turns the huge losses of his characters into, strangely, gains of a kind. The counterforces of experience are what he is after.

He told me recently that writing the first, serial version of "An American Dream" last year against deadlines for Esquire forced him to create a structure tighter than those of his previous novels. Since the Esquire version, he has rewritten perhaps 40 per cent of the book, fleshing out scenes and adding them, sounding every sentence, he said, 10 times for timbre.

WHAT desperate work, preparing an entirely public statement for a public that nominates its seducers mainly for their gaudiness! Mailer accuses in full rabbinical voice, but the guilty congregation is still watching for Tuesday Weld. He may be one of the last of a breed, a writer who tries to address the entire country. Malcolm Lowry once said that the only writers who count are the ones who burn. "You cannot trust the ones who are too careful," Mailer burns; he is not careful; he can be trusted. In past years his Dionysian rites of thought and act—sorcery to summon up all the shades of experience—sometimes ended with broken glasses and stale butts scattered through the mind's house. Now he is whipping his powers into line.

"Not safe. Not wise. Not admired," Gore Vidal once said in Mailer's defense.

"You are not responsible," James Baldwin told him another time, in a Greenwich Village bar.

"An American Dream" strives for a coup d'état instead of a negotiated artistic détente. Unwise, irresponsible, devoid of the charm that now passes for literature, it diagrams the pentacle around which so many of us dance with such fateful urgency.

Author's Query

TO THE EDITOR:

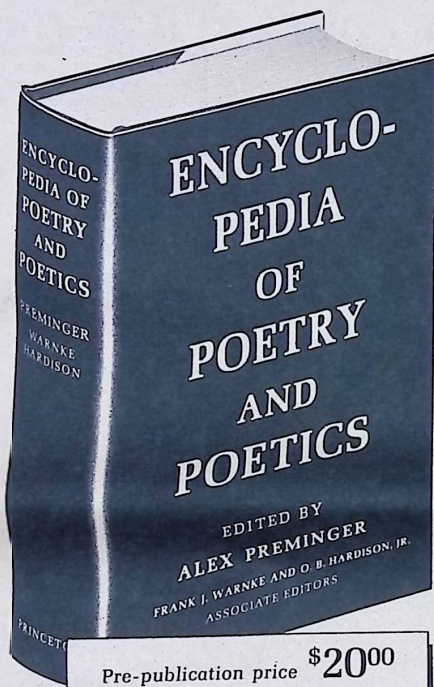
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