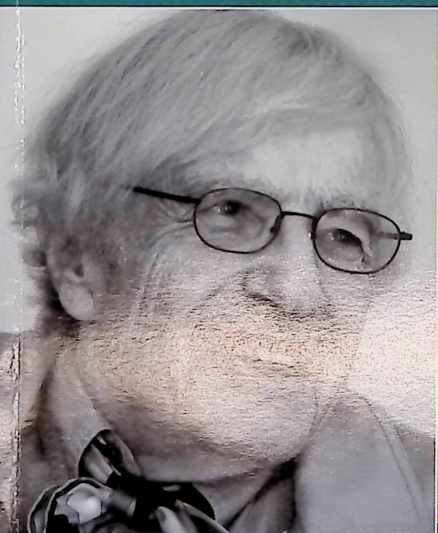


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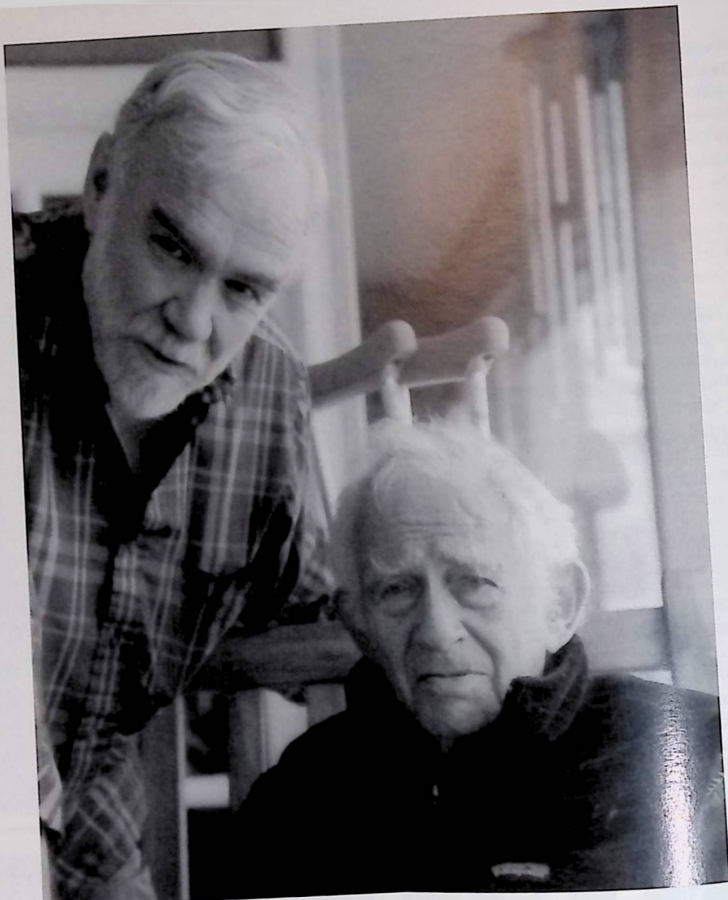
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J. MICHAEL LENNON AND NORMAN MAILER

Hitler in My Mind

THE ROOTS OF *The Castle in the Forest*

AN INTERVIEW BY J. MICHAEL LENNON

On September 12, 2006, I went to Norman Mailer's home in Provincetown to discuss his forthcoming novel, The Castle in the Forest (published on January 23, 2007). It was the first of about fifty interviews he gave in the course of a book tour that took him to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. The novel, Mailer's eleventh, was a best seller and went through several printings.

J. MICHAEL LENNON: *Can you say something about The Castle in the Forest as a way of perceiving history? How is it different from other historical novels?*

NORMAN MAILER: I think the immediate, and I will even say the huge, difference is the narrator. I can't think of any novel offhand in which an assistant to the Devil, or the Devil himself, is the narrator. Maybe in short stories—although I can't think of one of those either—but in any event, I found it curiously liberating because it allowed me to enter people's minds at will, which is of course the strength of nineteenth-century novels; you could be godlike. You could go into everyone's mind, or those you chose to enter, and as a result you got three-

dimensionality in relations between the characters. In effect, you were able to see people as they were on the surface and also within. Of course, their relations were corseted by nineteenth-century strictures on morality. You couldn't pursue certain lines of inquiry at all. On the other hand, the feel of the relationships was often rich. As a novelist I've missed that nineteenth-century strength. I used it in *The Naked and the Dead*, of course, where I entered everyone's head without worrying over it. I was young then and so it never occurred to me that these were serious esthetic problems that you ignore at your peril—the peril is that in the ranks of serious and acceptable modern literature, your book sinks into something a little less among your colleagues. You are seen as having written a decent best seller. I began to be bothered by that—I think the success of *The Naked and the Dead* obliged me to become more serious about my occupation. Obviously if I was going to keep writing books I had to learn more. I had to do more. For years, and now for decades, I've been obsessed with this problem. I don't want to use the word *obsessed*—it sounds like I was suffering all the time. I've been *preoccupied* with this problem. How do you enter more than one person's mind in a novel? How do you avoid the manacles of the first-person observer without violating something that's novelistically ineffable, yet subtly tormenting philosophically? So I was *diligent* when, behold, I had an assistant to the Devil to tell the story. Because then you could certainly enter people's minds in some depth.

JML: What percentage, roughly, of the characters in *The Castle in the Forest* actually lived?

NM: All of them, just about. There is one exception—I don't like to get into this because it can affect the reading of a book. It's as if you shorten one of the legs of someone walking by. Now, they're limping in some odd fashion; you don't want to do that to a reader. I'll answer your question, however, since I'll have to face it in future interviews. The only character I can think of off-hand who is wholly imaginary is Der Alte, the beekeeper. Alois, Hitler's father, kept bees most seriously in Hafeld, and so he must have known a few beekeepers in the area. I never came across anything in my research that suggested there was or was not such a person, but I felt it was necessary. In the course of it, I became fascinated with bees and it soon took over a fair amount of the book. There are certain symbols in a novel that are obvious—Melville's white whale, for example. Melville even spoke of the white whale as evil and declared that white was the color of evil, not black. But there are other symbols, which are not quite so definite. They can take on the true power of a symbol and so can be put into words. For me, it was the relation of the bees to Adolf Hitler.

JML: Was the mayor of Leonding real?

NM: Yes. Now whether he was real the way I paint him is another matter. All I knew is that Alois was friends with the mayor of Leonding and his name was Mayrhofer. There are many such facts in the book. More facts than fiction. Still, it is inconceivably a novel. The story is told by an assistant to

the Devil—what can be more fictional than that? I do enter all the minds of my characters. No historian or biographer can dare to do that. On the other hand, it has always seemed to me that once you cross the line from nonfiction to fiction it is incumbent upon you to be as true to the facts as you possibly can be. Those are the guideposts that enable you to chart the interiors of your figures.

JML: Is it fair to say that Hitler's father, Alois, is as important a character as Hitler himself in this novel?

NM: I would say he is equally important, maybe more so. I think I've done some fairly good male characters in my day, and he is certainly one of the best. I found myself intrigued by him. I love it when I'm truly fond of writing a character. Where every time, something interesting occurs. Where I'm not on top of it, where I don't feel that I dominate the character too entirely. He or she will show little vices and virtues I wasn't quite prepared for and yet they are absolutely believable. I go back to my often-used recollection of Jean Malaquais talking about writing, when I asked him why he continued to write his novels when it was so hard for him—he would spend fourteen hours a day at his desk and end up with three hundred words. Once I said to him, "You're a very intelligent man. Why do you insist on being a writer?" We had that kind of friendship; we were candid with each other. And he said, "Oh, I would never give it up. The only time I know the truth is at the point of my pen." And I find that true. It's one of the joys of writing. It is as if you are actually entering reality, and it will show you where to make the next move.

JML: Did you do the same kind of research for this novel that you did for the Picasso biography or for *The Gospel According to the Son*?

NM: Or for *Harlot's Ghost*.

JML: Or *Harlot's Ghost*.

NM: I always do as much research as my mind can digest, which means I often do a lot. Certain books take a good many years. Seven years went into *Harlot's Ghost* and eleven years for *Ancient Evenings*. For *Oswald's Tale*, I must have done two years of research. On this one, I spent four years of research, the last two while writing it. I had already read everything I could about that early period in Hitler's life, on which, incidentally, there are not that many good books in English. I also read everything in English concerning Hitler's life, the entire life. That's why the biography is not short. I haven't counted how many books are in the bibliography but there must be well over a hundred. I don't know. Quite a few. Maybe two hundred. I don't know. I didn't read every last one of them to every last page, but I certainly read most of them carefully. If you're going to write about someone in their childhood, and to write about someone in their childhood, and to write about someone in their childhood, you do have to know a good deal about the final product. The man is in the early material.

JML: Was any book or any cluster of books more indispensable to your research, or was it that you took a little bit from a lot of books?

NM: Well, there were three or four on his childhood that were important. In the bibliography, I've given asterisks to those. Some books that had nothing to do with his childhood I've also given an asterisk because they gave me a firm grasp of the man as a whole. To repeat: You can't write about a childhood without knowing the man as a whole.

JML: One of the strongest episodes in the novel concerns the coronation of Nicholas II. What was the reason for the inclusion of that?

NM: You know, I cannot really give you an answer. I had the instinct that if I wanted to do a truly good novel I had to move away from the subject matter in drastic fashion for fifty pages or so. Hans Hofmann, who may have been the foremost Abstract Expressionist of the fifties and sixties, once remarked, speaking of colored tiles, if you have a wall of blue tiles there should be one red tile present to make you truly feel the blueness of the wall. There is a certain monotony to a color that never shifts. So I think that may have been in my mind. I also felt that to be fixed entirely on Adolf Hitler's childhood was going to limit the dimensions of the work. Moreover, the narrator, D.T., the assistant to the Devil, needed his place. He is much more important to the outcome of the coronation of Nicholas II than he is in Hafeld or the other areas of Austria where the novel takes place. Finally, when you've been doing fiction as long as I have, you do follow your instincts.

In the beginning, a lot of people who read the earlier versions of the novel were upset by this departure. My wife was in a fury. She felt that I had a book which was interesting to read and then suddenly she's marooned in Russia—she has no interest in Russia at this point. "It's a separate novel, you should write it as a separate novel." We literally had arguments about it. Then I came to realize that she and the other detractors had a certain force to their argument. Perhaps it was too long, too detailed? I began to use the skills you acquire willy-nilly over fifty years of writing. I didn't wish to mold this departure entirely into the book; I wanted it to be separate, but I also wanted it to sit there more comfortably. And I happened to have some fun with the reader. I addressed the reader. I said, if this bothers you, why, skip over all these pages—turn to page such and such.

Nonetheless, I feel that the coronation of Nicholas II is necessary for the next novel. At eighty-three, I can't make any promises, but if I can keep working for the next few years and do the next book, I would like to have Rasputin in it and have D.T.—my assistant to the Devil—working with Rasputin. Assuming for the sake of argument that this won't happen—I hope it does, but I can offer no guarantee—this proposed second Russian section could take on its legitimacy in relation to the whole.

JML: The theme of incest is very strong in the novel. Did you emphasize it, or were you just following material?

NM: The material hints at it. Nobody ever said that there was incest as such in any of the books I read. Maybe there are German works not translated into English that might suggest it, but I felt it was implicit. There is no explanation of Hitler

without assuming some very large differences between him and other human beings. One of these possibilities is that he is a highly incestuous being, conceived by his mother, who is the daughter of his father. I have felt for a long time—and this is where a great many people who read this interview will part company with me altogether—but I've often believed that God and the Devil, or their representatives if you will, are present in any sexual intercourse that has excitement. They are there. So, I propose that the conception of Adolf Hitler took place with the Devil present. Even as Gabriel was present when Christ was conceived. If any man was ever Jesus Christ's opposite, it was Adolf Hitler. So I didn't have a backwards look about the incest; I thought it was basic to the conception. Interestingly, ironically, all those years ago when I was writing *Advertisements for Myself*, I said something about how I wanted to enter certain mysteries of our time and I listed incest. For years I wondered why. There was nothing incestuous in my life. It had never been a preoccupation in my mind. But all those decades between writing that and now—four or five decades later—there has been no use of incest in any form in my work. Now, it is one of the major themes of the book.

JML: Well, it is an historical fact that Hitler had one testicle.

NM: No, it's not an historical fact. It's argued. I accept it as likely.

JML: But it is a scientific fact that it is often a sign of incest.

NM: Yes.

JML: So you did have that to go on.

NM: Well, you know, I'm not trying to put the whole body of the book on half of one leg. There is another factor, minor perhaps, but at the least, is another factor, minor perhaps, also Alois' stated Klara, Hitler's mother, was also Alois' stated niece. He was not her blood uncle, he was taken into her mother's family by her grandfather, but she did call him "Uncle." That is known. Psychologically, then, there was incest. She was cohabiting with a man she saw as her uncle.

JML: I'd like to go a little further into the thought that demons influenced Hitler when he was young. You said it is conceivable that they were there at his conception. You are also serious about the presence of angels or, as you call them, Cudgels.

NM: Well, I don't call them Cudgels. The assistant to the Devil does. That is because they are always beating him up. Look, I happen to believe that God and the Devil are present in our affairs. Earlier in history, even before civilization, humans were more like peons in relation to God and the Devil, able to manifest basic instincts—hunting, procreation, and so forth. By now, I think humans have developed enough independence that it has become a three-pronged war. At any given moment, any two can team up against

the third element. These notions are, of course, antipathetic to modern psychology, with its resolute assumption that God and the Devil have no relationship to our affairs. I think that is limiting. It fails to account for a great deal of irrational or exceptional human behavior, precisely those moments when we end up doing inexplicable things that can't be explained through normal theories of passion or neurosis.

JML: My last question comes from Donna, my wife. She said, "The fact that Norman is Jewish and is writing about Hitler in this grand novel, how much does his Jewish identity have to do with his desire to write this novel?"

NM: I think just about everything. I've been living with Hitler in my mind ever since I was nine years old. By 1932, even before he became a ruling force, my mother was intensely sensitive to the dangers he presented. After he came to power, certainly all through my adolescence, everything that happened in Nazi Germany used to cause her pain. It was as if she knew. She'd grown up with a knowledge of the anti-Semitic intensions her father had left behind when he'd come to America. But then as a child going to school on the streets of Long Branch, New Jersey, where she grew up, there were kids who would abuse her and call her "Christ killer." Christian kids. So, Hitler was immensely real to her from early on. Finally, he took over a portion of my existence as well. You couldn't ignore him. What people don't understand and about a lot of Jewish behavior is that there is not much comprehension of what it means to lose half of the people in your race in no more than a decade. The Irish have some sense of it for what they lost to the potato famine. The Armenians have some sense. But generally speaking, the average WASP or well-established Catholic in America doesn't really understand it. Of course, in the main, they do feel antipathetic to anti-Semitism. Any prominent politician who utters an anti-Semitic remark could see his political career terminated. But even this is not necessarily equal to understanding how deep an influence Hitler made upon the Jews of my parents' generation and mine. So, this is a book that I've wanted to write for the last fifty years. In fact, originally, I was going to do a different version of it—I don't believe I would have called it *The Castle in the Forest*, but the epilogue to this novel contains the seeds of that earlier conception.

JML: The concentration camp novel—began in the early 1950s, and never completed.

NM: Yes.

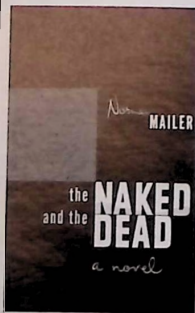
J. MICHAEL LENNON is preparing an edition of Norman Mailer's letters for publication in early 2008 by Random House, and was recently appointed as his authorized biographer.

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The Castle in the Forest

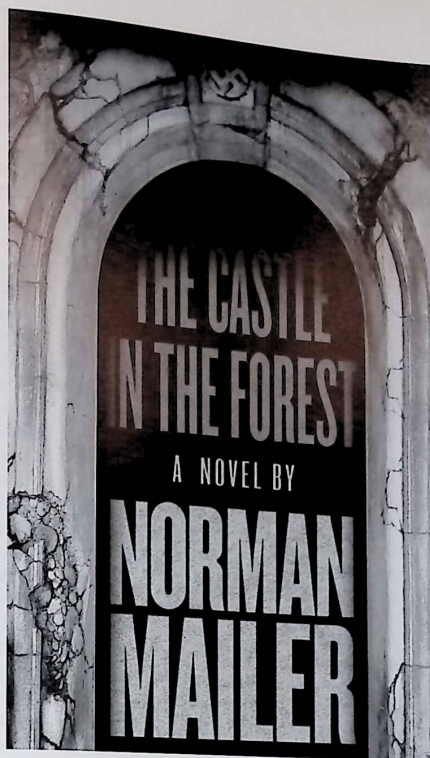
BY NORMAN MAILER
Random House, 2007

THE DOZEN OR SO YEARS of the Nazi empire that devastated the twentieth century have never been fully explained, and those of us who came of age as that horrendous swath cut across human worth may remember the glib newsreels—those Luftwaffe aces in their natty uniforms and cocked hats—that held our interest before the feature film. How this disaster happened has been documented plentifully, but the question of why still seems to browse undisturbed in the depths of the Black Forest.

It is still hard to believe that Germany, one of the most civilized countries in the world, culturally and intellectually significant, could fall for a third-rater like Adolf Hitler, a quick study of the commonplaces and of spurious texts, and then allow his half-baked ideas and comic-opera posturing to lead that citizenry into destruction. Yes, the crushing defeat in World War I and the economic depression that followed were factors that contributed to the historical development of the Third Reich, but why these woundings also released the virulent antibodies that lay unsuspected in the German being yet remains a mystery to many.

In *The Castle in the Forest*, Norman Mailer offers a meditation on, if not an explanation of, this enigma. Some reviews have reminded us that this novel is his first book in ten years as if to alert us to some loss of grip, but this reader finds the prose equal to the depth and richness of his earlier oeuvre—some thirty-five volumes. The wit and intellectual charm flex easily, the language plays gracefully, and it is a joy to read this quality of writing, this voice so different from that heard in the well-mannered amendments passed and then passed on from contemporary writing workshops.

As many must know by now, Mailer's novel concerns the boyhood and formative years of Adolf Hitler—emphasis on the formative perhaps, because it is the novelist's suggestion that the Devil had a hand in his final shape. Yet, the narrative is largely concerned with the young Hitler's family, his parents and siblings and how their peasant strife evolved in the last quadrant of the nineteenth century. His father is an ambitious civil servant in the Austrian customs bureau, a diligent bureaucrat stepping up the ladder into the petit bourgeois. His mother is an efficient housekeeper and a source of steady love for her son. So, Mailer



gives us a family portrait, and if the reader didn't know that the boy called Adi would grow up to become the Führer, this story could be read as an old-fashioned novel of peasant life, ordinary routines determined by the seasons. Oh yes, there's a little incest here and there, and some preoccupation with anal issues, but that could have been said of almost any family. After all, where was Dr. Freud finding his patients?

But we have privileged information, and Mailer's relentless naturalistic pursuit of the family's ordinary existence prompts whisperings from another observer of this conundrum—the voice of Hannah Arendt. Her ghost anyway. However, as some have argued since her essay appeared nearly fifty years ago, her concept of “the banality of evil” leaves no room for conflict; take it or leave it, she seems to say, there are always bad apples on the same branch with the rest of us decent fruits and we're never going to learn why.

But Mailer, the novelist, offers another possibility and *The Castle in the Forest* dramatizes this. It may be another take-it-or-leave-it proposition, but it is a lot more interesting for it envisions a Miltonic struggle between Good and Evil for the future of the young Adolf Hitler. As we know, Evil wins. The young Hitler's matriculation is directed by a Young Hitler's matriculation is directed by a minor demon, on assignment from the Maestro, who guides the peasant child from his banal origins into the Dark Realm. D.T., as he calls himself, narrates the tale under the cover of an SS officer's identity, one of Himmler's own retinue of devils. He reports his successes: the boy's histrionic dominance of his playmates in war games, the willful and fatal contagion with measles of a younger brother, and his rising ecstasy within the fumes of

a beehive's extermination—the prodigious information on beekeeping somehow endowing the metaphor's rightness.

The novel ends with Adolf turning fifteen, a crafty adolescent with elaborate masturbation techniques; a poor student with a desire to be an artist. “Prevent this,” the Devil steps in to tell his minion. “The last thing we need is one more artist full of sour spirit at his lack of large recognition.” As we know, Hitler's bucolic scenes of cottages enveloped by climbing roses were rejected more than once by the Vienna Academy, and one can only wonder about the difference in world history if a small space at the end of a hallway had been found for his pedestrian dabble. Thus enters the Devil to toy with our destiny as a means to defeat the Dummkopf, as his opponent is called.

This profile by Norman Mailer of one of the era's important monsters will not appeal to everyone nor will it bolster the causal relationships some accept as history, but *The Castle in the Forest* is contemplation worthy of a place in the acknowledgment of this horror, even if it is not a guide for its complete understanding.

“To read about the skills or triumphs of any protagonist,” says the demon-narrator, “is bound to elicit happiness in just about all who follow the story, especially if there is a suggestion of the sentimental, or even better, the magical—useful tools for any author who wishes to arouse quick emotions in the reader. That is why so many popular writers come looking for us. We love them. We do not disabuse them. We enjoy them. Popular writers usually believe they are working both for God and their own prosperous selves. All the while, we are encouraging them to steep their readers in baths of misperception. The profit comes to us. Misperception of reality will, at the least, waste God's Time, and that is a form of compound interest in our economy.”

And so unfolds this perception of a reality we all think we recognize, of which we at least share a comfortable understanding, only to be awakened to a more dreadful nightmare.

HILARY MASTERS is the author of more than twenty books. His most recent novel is *Elegy* for Sam Emerson (Southern Methodist University Press), reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

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Preface by Christopher Busa, Introduction by Norman Mailer



"After midnight, many lamps are still on in town, and one can often see in [Hirose's] prints a line of light etched by a car as it comes around a turn."

—Norman Mailer,
from the Introduction

