

Mailer plays devil's advocate in portrait of Hitler's childhood

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By MARK KENNEDY

Of The Associated Press

"The Castle in the Forest"
(Random House, 477 pages,
\$27.95) — Norman Mailer

Ten years after he dared to channel Jesus Christ, Norman Mailer has switched his attention southward — way southward.

In "The Castle in the Forest," the 83-year-old literary lion adopts the first-person voice of a devil — one who is charged with minding Adolf Hitler, a man he calls "my most important client."

This devil-narrator — not Satan himself, but a lieutenant — pops in and out of Hitler's early life, recounting his incestuous birth, the beatings received from a stern father, even his craven thoughts.

"I live with the confidence that I am in a position to understand Adolf," the narrator writes. "For the fact is that I know him. I must repeat. I know him from top to bottom."

It's a literary device that allows Mailer to run free, filling in the historical spaces and inner life that none of the books listed in his six-page bibliography can. Who, after all, can argue with a sul-furious spirit?

"I remain a devil, not a novelist," the narrator says about the manuscript. "It is more a memoir and certainly has to be most curious as a biography since it is as privileged as a novel. I do possess the freedom to enter many a mind."

He does not possess total freedom — that is the province of Satan himself, called the Maestro or the Evil One by his followers. He and his vast armies are arrayed against the forces of God — or, as the devils call him derisively, Dummkopf. Young Hitler, it comes as no surprise, quickly attracts the attention of the Maestro.

The novel's action takes place between 1837 and 1903, ending when Hitler is 14. That means the figure who emerges clearest is not the future Fuhrer, but his father, Alois Hitler, an egotistical, cold-hearted Austrian bureaucrat who

cheats on his wives, impregnates his own daughter and bullies his family.

If you're hoping to find here the source of Hitler's evil — or evil itself, for that matter — Mailer's novel is unsatisfying. There's no single moment or sequence of events that possibly explains or foreshadows Hitler's horrors to come.

His father may have been stern and too ready with the belt, but his mother dearly loved him. His siblings may have gotten more attention, but he was always fed, schooled and doted upon. It's less a portrait of a monster as a young man than an illustration of Hannah Arendt's banality of evil.

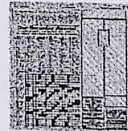
In some ways, the novel makes a good companion piece to "The Gospel According to the Son," Mailer's 1997 novel in which he inhabited a very human, even petulant, Messiah. Both characters seek the approval of the fathers, both are quick to anger.

This latest Mailer novel may be tedious as a Hitler biography, but it's still fascinating for its portrayal of the spectral, Miltonesque battles recounted by our devilish narrator, who writes in stilted, 19th-century prose seemingly translated from German.

In Mailer's imagination, devils and angels conduct unseen, shadowy tug-of-wars in which victories are measured in inches, partial souls, or a rare, undefended opening. Both sides etch human dreams, play on our guilt and conscience, gather intelligence. They hope, at best, to influence events — though it often ends in a stalemate.



MAILER



"We do not appropriate people by way of a lightening flash," our narrator tells us, in one of his many asides. "The prevailing fact of our existence is that we are obligated to live within a limited budget, and so, our projects are chosen with discretion."