

Mailer Recounts Hitler's Youth With Usual Metaphor Mastery

By PHILLIP SIFORA

"The Castle in the Forest," by Norman Mailer (Random House, \$28)

In speaking of literary style, Aristotle says in "Poetics": "The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. ... [It] is the mark of genius."

Aristotle anticipated the literary genius of Norman Mailer. "The Castle in the Forest," Mailer's new novel, employs an elaborate army of metaphors, infusing his narrative with complex meaning. The metaphor of beekeeping, for example, represents, among other things, the national, cultural and personal conflicts of the first half of the 20th century. Sordid characters such as Der Alte, an ancient beekeeper and client of the devil, are metaphoric illustrations of degeneration. God and Satan are entangled metaphors for ageless conflict, earthly and cosmic.

The craft of making metaphors has characterized Mailer's art and act of writing for more than 65 years, going back to his 1941 unpublished novel, "No Percentage."

Over this broad sweep of time, Mailer has proved himself to be a literary genius, joining the half-dozen or so eminent American novelists of the 20th century, artists who have enchanted both popular and academic audiences.

Since the 1948 publication of "The Naked and the Dead," Mailer has maintained major celebrity status by his prodigious output of nearly 50 books as well as an array of essays, short stories, drama and poetry. He also has directed four films. Mailer has won a National Book Award, the Lifetime Achievement Award, given by the National Book Award Foundation, two Pulitzer Prizes and, in 2006, France's most prestigious award, the Legion of Honor, for his literary works. The only major literary prize to elude Mailer is the Nobel Prize for Literature.

At 83, Mailer has challenged us, once

again, with one of his most ambitious books (no small undertaking considering the narrating persona of his "The Gospel According to the Son" is Christ himself). "Castle" is a nearly 500-page novel that recounts the ancestry and youth of Adolf Hitler, chronicling the life of the future Führer until 1905, when Hitler was 16.

The Protagonist And The Maestro

The story is a complex, multigenerational weave of historical fact and fiction, told by first-person narrator and self-proclaimed "protagonist" D.T. (short for Dieter), an assistant to Satan, who is referred to as "Maestro."

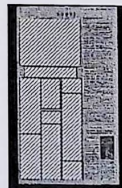
D.T. is both "spirit-agent" and corporeal figure, embedded in the body of an SS officer working under Heinrich Himmler in a flash-forward to the future. D.T. is an explicitly self-conscious "novelist," struggling with the challenge of telling the beginning of the Hitler story through the memory prism of his later experiences "living" in the United States.

We learn this history at the outset of the narrative, which occurs long after its main events. "Castle" is very much a novel of memory re-creation and the confusing of events and their meanings.

If the storytelling machinery of "Castle" sounds complicated, it is indeed, and one reason for the novel's complexity lies in its dense tapestry of plot, theme(s) and character. The major character is Alois Hitler (Adolf's father), who receives more ink than anyone else, yet we are constantly aware the novel is also about the

dense and detailed embroidery of experience, circumstances and mental machinations that constitute a dysfunctional family, over generations, culminating in the formation of the most infamously evil person of the past century.

"Castle" is a *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age chronicle describing the strategic rites of passage, often traumatic, of young Adolf. Equally important, it is also the tale of the antecedent conditions and



characters that forge the development of a "rogue" individual laden with contradictions who later horrifies the world by his unspeakable acts.

Alois lives a befuddled, besotted existence hounded by questions of his origins (is he a product of incest?) and ethnicity (is he half-Jewish?). Despite a stable career (he works his way up the bureaucratic ladder as a customs official), he is a brutish oaf given to reckless sexual behavior throughout his adult life, continually abusing his wives and children, behavior fueled by an unquenchable thirst for beer.

Alois is a lout who mistreats nearly everyone: wives, mistresses, children, servants and animals. He remains chronically dissatisfied with his middle-class existence and strives to become a "man of the land" — a traditional farmer first, then a bee farmer.

Alois proves a dismal failure in nearly everything he does and is. His influence on Adolf is immeasurable.

The family preoccupation with beekeeping (apiculture) is a dominant, strategic element of the narrative, taking up nearly half the novel.

The business of bees is of special importance because it is through the master metaphor of bees that young Adolf comes to learn early lessons of life, including the frightening yet exciting realities of the "birds and the bees."

Born in 1889, Adolf begins to come of age in the 1890s, the height of the family's bee business. The chronicling of the bees, intertwined with misadventures of Alois, wife Klara, Alois Jr., several other siblings, distant relatives and, of course Adolf, reveals Mailer at his best in depicting the complications of daily life through its mundane, dreary duties.

Family farming interactions are the context for motifs of love, hate, sex, desire, greed, doubt, anxiety, depression and the eternal struggle to survive.

Mailer, like all writers, reveals much of his personal philosophy of human experience in his art. The world of Mailer is a world of conflict, intensified by opposing forces in tension with one another. These forces, and their various representations, are often fascinating and never operate outside the sphere of "rough equilibrium," the only condition under which true tension and conflict can take place.

In "Castle" there are two competing

forces: God and Satan, yet there is a third realm — the human — which is the battleground between Satan and God. Mailer's life work has explored the complexities and fascinations of scenes of contention, in this case, dueling cosmic forces.

Final resolution of conflict, in the context of "winning and losing," is never possible in the Mailer worldview. An honest writer describes, explores and interrogates. (Not coincidentally, Ernest Hemingway held these beliefs.)

No Answers, Only Questions

Does Mailer's powerful novel about the tactical and strategic machinations of the nature of evil remotely suggest how one might live — characters and readers? Are codes offered that might thwart the forces of evil as they attempt to influence human events? No, clearly not. To "explain reality" is a redoubtable and impossible task for Mailer, as his more experienced readers know. As D.T. sums it up: "What enables devils to survive is that we are wise enough to understand there are no answers — there are only questions."

This sensibility is revealed in the texture of "Castle." D.T. reveals himself to be both novelist and amateur philosopher versed in the art of storytelling yet privileged to perceive human weaknesses and potential that are under constant search by the forces of E.O. (Evil One).

Yet God also plays a central role in a narrative that is not so much about realities of good and evil, but rather how agents, opportunities and circumstances bring about good and evil. The ancient Greeks called this emphasis on timing *kairos*, and "Castle" is rife with opportunities for the promotion of evil. Timing is all.

What makes "Castle" powerful and seductive is the compelling manner in which it unrelentingly reveals the twists and turns of life that are beyond human control. This revelation does not reject freewill. Indeed, D.T. expresses frustration by human resistance to his manipulation. Humans make choices (and devils do, too), always in the midst of the never-ending conflict between God (served by angels) and Satan (served by a hierarchy of assistants).

Now well into his ninth decade, Mailer

has — once again and most aggressively — confounded, challenged, questioned and pleased his readers, with hints of more to come. In a flash-forward moment referring to Hitler's experiences in World War I, D.T. interrupts himself with a momentary slip of the tongue: "Too soon to speak of that, however." A subtle foreshadowing by the literary maestro that he may not yet be finished exploring the most enigmatic incarnation of evil the 20th century has seen.

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From David Price for photo press in "The Castle in the Forest." Norman Mailer was born as a metaphor when describing the early lessons in Adolf Hitler's life. The photo family's perspective with background in a desert, at night, almost of the entire, taking up nearly half the panel.

