

SPEAKING VOLUMES

A portrait of the devil as a young man

In his new novel "The Castle in the Forest" (Random House, \$28), Norman Mailer imagines the tortured, incestuous history of Adolf Hitler and his father Alois in late 19th-century Austria. The book is narrated by Dieter — a bureaucrat who works for the Devil and later assumes the form of a former SS officer — who corrupts young Adolf from birth and turns him toward evil.

The novel opens with the career of Alois as he climbs out of poverty to become a customs official in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Alois is a sexual predator, and an abusive husband and father. His third wife is Klara, a woman who in Mailer's fictionalized tale is almost certainly his own daughter. She gives birth to Adolf.

The demonic Dieter uses not pitchforks and claws, but subtle manipulation, otherworldly spies, human agents and implanted thoughts to form Adolf into a man with the potential to become a monster. Battling the angels who try to protect the boy's soul, Dieter fosters situations that crush Adolf's fragile dreams. At the same time, Alois teaches his son cruelty and bitterness. As the book ends, a ragged teenage Adolf starts the long road to his genocidal destiny. Mailer's intriguing exploration of the Hitler family asks dark questions about the human soul.

Mailer, 83, was born in Long Branch, raised in Brooklyn and educated at Harvard. His first novel, "The Naked and the

Dead" was published in 1948. Mailer has written more than 30 works of fiction and nonfiction, including "The Armies of the Night," which won him a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, and "The Executioner's Song," which won him his second Pulitzer. Mailer has nine children and lives full time in Provincetown, Mass., with his sixth wife, Norris Church Mailer.

Freelance writer Dylan Foley visited with Mailer in his Provincetown living room overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

Q. Why did you decide to write a novel about Hitler's family and childhood?

A. In a certain sense, I'd say that this book has been with me since I was nine years old. My mother, who only had a high school education, was a very intelligent woman and was very sensitive to certain things.

She had a sense of Hitler very early, at the same time that the British aristocrats were saying "This fellow is a very good defense against the Communists." In the early 1930s, my mother said "This man is going to kill half the Jews." She was very aware of anti-Semitism, being Jewish. Her parents had come over from Lithuania. Jewish culture in Eastern Europe had been battered by anti-Semitism at the time. For her it was no joke. Hitler was always real to me and very frightening. Part of me has been obsessed with him.

Q. At times the book seems to be mostly tragedy, but then it becomes a farce. How would you describe it?

A. I don't care about the names that people put on things. What I try to do in a book is to get the people as real as possible. I don't see people the way most people do. Most people are busy with their lives and need quick takes, like "He's up to no good." What I am interested in is, "Where is he up to no good, and when he is surprisingly good?" I'm interested in the double aspect of people.

Q. How would you characterize Hitler's father?

A. He's a man who's had a hard life, and he's tough and vulnerable, like so many other people. People who are macho are macho here and vulnerable there. I've known some fairly macho guys and they all have their vulnerable side. People have a tendency to say, "What is Mailer up to?" I can say no more than these are people as well as I understand them.

How could a man have a life like Alois' without having a great deal of cruelty? I am not a moralist. Moralism is often the first strength of a mediocre mind. In other words, people tend to be moral because it gives them a sense of security that they haven't earned.

Q. Dieter is an overworked functionary who takes pride in his work. Why did you put a devil in your story?

A. Dieter is the perfect gentleman. I've believed that the



Devil has existed for a long time. I hold certain religious beliefs that are opposed to fundamentalism. My notion is that God is a creator, not a law giver. I've always seen God as existential, a God who may succeed or fail. God is doing the best that he or she can do. The Devil is doing his best to overthrow God. That's the battleground. For me, it was natural to have the Devil in the book. Hitler is so beyond the pale that, humanly speaking, one can't understand him. If Jesus was born as God's son, I would go so far as to say that Hitler was born as the Devil's son. Hitler is the ghost of the 20th century. Speaking as a Jew, I think Hitler did tremendous damage to the Jews even after his death, so that they can't think of Hitler without becoming paralyzed.

Q. Your novel shifts focus from Alois to Adolf. Adolf truly becomes hardened by the death of his baby brother Edmund, who he may have killed. What happened to Adolf?

A. After the death of Edmund, there is a serious change in him. There is a huge guilt that he thinks he might have killed Edmund, and he may well have. It poisoned something in him and he began to go through bad

years, not only the bad years in school, but the bad years later in Vienna. He was pursued by a profound guilt that he could not accept. I don't get into it in

this book, but maybe we'll get into it in another book. At 83, I'm not going to make predictions about what books I am going to do.

