

THE
INDEPENDENT

Arts & Books Review

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*Norman
Mailer*

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

Norman Mailer on his satanic new novel



**CULTURAL
LIFE**
FIONA SHAW
ACTRESS

Books

For obvious reasons I am reading the Samuel Beckett biography *Damned to Fame* by James Knowlson, but also by my bed is the new Dan Paterson translation of Rilke's *Orpheus* poems, which are marvellous, and his essay on the book which is one of the great revelatory pieces of writing. I also have, for delight, Josephine Hart's *Catching Life By the Throat: How to Read Poetry and Why*. And I have just finished Candia McWilliam's novel *A Case of Knives* – a long overdue read which I loved.

Music

Before Christmas I was lucky enough to see Phyllida Lloyd's Opera North production of *Peter Grimes* at Sadler's Wells. I listen to the new season from the Met [New York's Metropolitan Opera House] on the radio. Other than that, I've recorded my lines from *Happy Days* to dull myself with: anti-music!

Film

Rehearsing and performing in a play means one has to exclude a lot of usual activities, so I am out of date on film viewing. I did see *Black Dahlia*, which baffled everyone. I loved *My Architect*, which was a documentary of such upsetting family truths; art and bigamy – an explosive combination. Helen Mirren's wonderful performance in *The Queen* has won a deserving Golden Globe. My favourite film is John Huston's *The Dead* with the great Donal McCann. I watch it whenever I can.

Visual arts

The Hockney exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery was just so uplifting: his variation and seriousness, humility and fun.

Theatre & opera

A casualty of rehearsing – a terror of focusing on another story. But I did see Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer* at the Cottesloe and fell under its spell heartily – wonderful performances. I also saw Krapp's *Last Tape* with the great Harold Pinter at the Royal Court, an event in history.

INTERVIEW BY CHARLOTTE CRIPPS

Fiona Shaw stars in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* at the National's Lyttelton Theatre in repertoire until 1 March.
www.nationaltheatre.org.uk

Norman Mailer has spent his life in pursuit of 'the Big Book' – and hell-raising, he tells JOHN FREEMAN. Now, the 84-year-old author has imagined Adolf Hitler as seen through the eyes of the Devil's assistant

'I wanted to outdo the Bible'

There was a time when Norman Mailer used to talk about the Big Book. It provided the interviews he gave in the 1950s like a white whale, blasting into view and then plunging back into the darkness, where it would lurk until the next publication date. With each decade, and each new book, from *The American Dream* to *The Executioner's Song*, until his novel about Jesus Christ, *The Gospel According to the Son*, it seemed like Mailer might yet drag his promised catch to shore. And at 84, America's most pugilistic novelist has done something unusual. He's beginning to say he may not get it.

"I may have made announcements 50 years ago of the kind of book I was going to write," says Mailer at his home in Provincetown, Massachusetts. "But I'm not going to stick to those predictions."

Mailer is swathed in a sweater, sitting in a chair, looking small and cosy and not at all like he is about to punch someone. Even more surprising than his grandfatherly appearance – this, after all, is the man who wrote *The Fight*, the classic book about Muhammad Ali's "Rumble in the Jungle" – is the fact that he is making such pronouncements on the eve of his latest book, his 36th, *The Castle in the Forest*, an audacious novel that tells the story of Hitler's first 17 years through the eyes of DT, an assistant to the Devil himself. "I am very confident in this book," Mailer says as if to reassure he's not passing off a lemon. "I really feel good about it." He just may not find himself shoulder to shoulder with Tolstoy at the end of the day.

It will not be for lack of trying, though. From the beginning of his career, Mailer swung from the fences, as they say in American baseball parks. His 1948 debut, *The Naked and the Dead*, a Second World War tale inspired in part by his experiences in the South Pacific, earned him comparisons to Hemingway. Mailer accepted the mantle of this expectation

all too eagerly. As a result, his follow-up novels, *Barbury Shore* (1951) and *Deer Park* (1955), were savagely reviewed, setting up a lifelong battle with critics. This was not a man who took a punch lying down. When he wrote about boxing, Mailer wrote from the perspective of a man who had fought semi-professionally. When his books received harsh criticism, Mailer taunted the critics by taking out full-page ads in *The Village Voice* excerpting the choicest jabs as if to say, hit me harder. He entered the tabloids for his marriages, his rows, for stabbing his wife with a penknife at a party, for his Hollywood appearances. Rather than hide from the attention, he leapt into it.

He switched over to reportage and put himself in the centre of the action – inventing New Journalism in the process and writing two of his most enduring masterpieces, *Armies of the Night* (1968), his non-fiction account of a Vietnam protest, and his "non-fiction novel" about the trial and execution of Gary Gilmore, *The Executioner's Song* (1979). By putting himself at the centre of the picture, Mailer may have made himself an immense target, but he also managed to needle America's moral conscience – investigating its wars, its broken political system, its obsession over violence and puritanical attitude toward sex, its craven love of fame and yen for larger-than-life characters, from Gilmore to Picasso to Lee Harvey Oswald.

Looking back on these days from the present, Mailer sounds a sober note of an ageing strategist. "When you're younger, any time you make a serious decision to go in a given direction you have to weigh the opposition," he says. "And that weighs on you – it gives you less freedom in a certain sense to follow your instincts. But at my age it doesn't matter much – people are going to say nasty things, I guess they've said it before. One of the advantages of getting old, is you really don't give a fuck any more. What are they

going to do, come and kill me? Fine, make a martyr of me! Make me immortal!"

But for the first time in years, they're not leading with the jabs. Publication of *The Castle in the Forest* in America was met with baffled and surprised kudos – as if, and this has been a recurring theme in Mailer's life, they didn't know he still had it in him. The *New York Times* greeted the book with a 6,200-word essay which praised Mailer's "willingness to fail", and called the "remarkable" novel "Mailer's most perfect apprehension of the absolutely alien."

This is a fascinating, exceptionally dirty book that also happens to want to



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THE WEEK AHEAD

Monday: Visual Arts & Classical
Tuesday: General arts
Wednesday: Architecture & Radio
Thursday: Theatre
Friday: Film, Rock & Pop, Books

Cover photograph: AP/Random House, Christina Pabst



turn the clock of America's cosmology back 60 years. In short, Mailer believes that the world is run by a threesome – God, Man, and the Devil – and that Hitler was the Devil's response to Jesus Christ. The novel's most eye-popping scene involves Hitler's bawdy, raucous, incestuous conception – with the Devil inserting himself into young Adolf's soul at the moment of his parents' climax.

"Look, I thought back on my life and there were some fucks that were just evil," Mailer says, flashing a wicked grin. As provocative as this sounds, Mailer says he is not being facetious, that he wants to answer a question here – what was the

genesis of Hitler's evil? "Look, we can understand Joseph Stalin in a way," he says. "One of the things about Stalin is that he was one of the very toughest men in Russia. Hitler was not that tough. It was as if odd gifts were given to him at extraordinary moments." Mailer says such gifts can only have come from the Devil, who Mailer believes works all the time.

In the book, DT explains the process as if it were a kind of covert CIA operation, with budgets to spend and miniature private loyalties to be won over. In person, Mailer is a bit more specific. "Maybe every year there are 1,000 people invested by the Devil or a million people? Then

they either come to fruition or they don't." Hitler, in Mailer's view, was a high point of this constant battle for power, something he says his mother knew in Brooklyn long before Hitler had marched on Poland. "My mother was very affected by Hitler," he says. "When I was nine years old, she knew already, long before the statesmen did, that Hitler was a disaster and a monster. That he was probably going to kill half the Jews."

And so, growing up in Brooklyn with Hitler fascinated by him, Mailer has long thought he would write this book. But first he had to get to *The Gospel According to the Son*, which told Christ's

story in his own words. The idea for it came to Mailer in a Paris hotel room. Mailer couldn't sleep, so he picked up the Bible. "I thought, 'This is such a funny book. It's got sentences that are worthy of Shakespeare, but most of it was dreadful.' Then I thought, 'There are 100 writers in the world who could do a better job.' And I'm one of them." Mailer wrote the book and got slaughtered for it, and today, even he admits: "I felt I didn't quite bring it off. I felt like I was making a reach for the material," he says judiciously.

With Hitler, though, Mailer says he did not feel this barrier. Spending time with a bad man was not a problem, as he ►

“I learnt from writing about Lee Harvey Oswald in *Oswald's Tale*. ‘You know your characters don't need to be there to make you happy with how wonderful they are and how warm-hearted they are and how human they are. You can write about a monster, and so far as you enjoy writing, enjoy the work.’”

As a Jewish writer, he says he has also long since been ready to approach Hitler with a cool head. “I remember the first time I visited Germany in the Fifties I was very much on edge.” Not any more, however. In fact, Mailer says he worked very hard to make the book feel German – reading and absorbing and then channelling it back on to the page, and then inventing. “There is very little known about Hitler's childhood,” he says. “He concealed much of it.” So Mailer ad-libbed, speculating about Hitler's parents' incestuous relationship to a degree that outstrips history. He also invents a libidinous beekeeper, and, most interestingly, invests a good deal of the book's energy into bringing to life Hitler's father, Alois, who emerges as a grabbing, greedy, sexually ravenous customs official. Mailer also manages to make him an almost sympathetic character. “I felt for him,” Mailer says. “I mean: he is a man. And say what you will about him, he's got balls.”

That Mailer can say this about a man who brought into the world one of its worst mass-murderers shows how much he is thinking of this territory as a novel, not some aborted biography. Mailer has worked on the book long enough to lose track of when he started exactly. He has done a mountain of research – evident in the book's bibliography – and travelled to Austria, which, “when you begin walking with two canes ain't the easiest thing in the world”. In recent years his knees have gone out, and his canes are close by. During the course of the interview he does not stand.

“There was one early review that was essentially favourable, but it irritated the hell out of me,” says Mailer, revealing his old feistiness. “Let's say it irritated the shit out of me. Because the reviewer said, in some long-winded way of course, Mailer is just rewriting Freud.” Mailer is referring to the book's strong, one might say pungent, scatological theme. “Why? Because I paid attention to toilet training. Well, as a father of eight children I do know a little bit about toilet training.”

The evidence of this assertion surrounds him. The end tables in the room are stacked four-deep with photographs of Mailer offspring. Several paintings of Mailer line the walls – a large one hangs in the front office depicting himself and his sixth wife, Norris Church Mailer, whom he has been with for 25 years now, and a friend in Havana. As Mailer winds up into a story about how the painting came about, pausing and sucking at his gums, as if for dramatic effect, his assistant Duane lingers to hear it told. Mailer talks in short, emphatic bursts, his words perfectly articulated, his voice a husky gravel – hearing him speak is not unlike listening to a preacher hold forth. This is Mailer in his element, passing off tales of conspicuousness in Havana, reminiscing on taking classes at the Sorbonne after the war, doing a dance on the grave of his past and future critics. (“You have confounded critics over the years.” “Well, they have confounded me.”) Large windows open on to the bay and the ocean beyond. Mailer is so good at this game of give and take it's hard to imagine him alone, doing the solitary work to write. But he did and still does.

Mailer used to print in marathon writing sessions. He even once retreated to a shack nearer the ocean to work but the sound of the surf destroyed his rhythms. He has been coming to Provincetown for nearly 50 years – part of *Deer Park* was

written here – but it has only been year-round in the last two decades. Now he has become used to five, six hours at a stretch, sometimes without lunch if he became absorbed. It is an almost gentle life. There is one thing that can inspire his old fury, though: the Iraq war. Mailer's outrage over it boiled over into several blog posts he wrote for Ariana Huffington's weblog, The Huffington Post. “The huge shock I felt when that war started was the willful blindness of people who were intelligent enough to know what they were getting into,” he says, his gravelly voice rising a register. “And the idiocy of the people who didn't know what they were getting into – like our God-fearing President.”

Once struck, Mailer's cord of rage vibrates powerfully. For the next 10 minutes, he rails against Bush – not so much as a person, but as for what he represents (and

what Mailer feels he has done) to American cultural life. “People really do take their cue from how well the leader speaks. FDR was able to turn the nation around because he spoke so beautifully. He had such command of language, such a love of language. The English were able to keep themselves together after losing the Empire because they had Shakespeare and they have a tradition of speaking well. And when you have a leader who speaks in dull slogans you are stupefying the mind of the country. That's his greatest sin – even greater than Iraq. America is a dumber country now. The average person in America is dumber than they were in 2000.”

Mailer says there might be a lesson here for Americans, one not far off from the bailiwick of this book. “My feeling now is all countries can potentially become monstrous nations – and I think the last

few years here, it's not as if we became a monstrous nation. But for the first time in Americans' lives, the possibility is so.” In other words, the Devil is not entirely responsible for Hitler or any other politician's rise to power. Conditions made it possible, too, and so vigilance of governments is just as important. “Given the hideous conditions in Germany after the First World War, not only the shame and humiliation of losing that war in an extraordinary thoroughgoing way” – Mailer rattles off the social context of Hitler's rise – “given all that, all the conditions were there for a monster to take over the country.”

And yet, to say that alone created Hitler, to Mailer, is not enough. “I'm not here to guarantee it. But I'm saying we won't understand this unless we go back to the notion – that maybe God and the Devil do exist!”

‘The Castle in the Forest’ will be published on 15 February (Little, Brown £17.99)
John Freeman is president of the (US) National Book Critics Circle



AP; Bettmann/Corbis

Scenes from a writer's life: (clockwise from left) arm-wrestling Muhammad Ali in 1965; Mailer being escorted to his cell after being accused of stabbing his wife in November 1960; Mailer and his present wife, Norris Church Mailer, in Provincetown in May 2005; chatting to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in 1978



“Maybe every year there are 1,000 people invested by the Devil with evil – or could it be a million people?”