

Now age 84,
acclaimed author
Norman Mailer
remains a ...

Literary lightning rod

By Allen Pierleoni
BEE STAFF WRITER

The literary lion is in the winter of his years, but he still can bare his fangs and flash that legendary killer instinct.

Norman Mailer, who turned 84 Wednesday, just published his 11th novel, his first fiction in 10 years — though he wrote five nonfiction titles in between.

"The Castle in the Forest" (Random House, \$27.95, 477 pages) tells the story of young Adolf Hitler, from his conception to his early teen years. And a twisted tale it is, narrated by "Dieter," who at first identifies himself as an SS officer under the direction of Heinrich Himmler. But Dieter turns out to be a demon dispatched to earth by Satan with the mission of ministering to young Adolf, one of his "clients." In essence, the story is about one devil mentoring another, with some of Mailer's own demons dancing from page to page.

Mailer the researcher has done his usual meticulous job of writing a fiction within a framework of historical accuracy — a seven-page bibliography appears at the end of the book.

"The Castle in the Forest" is epic stuff, simultaneously convoluted and compelling. A lot of sweat and blood went into its crafting, but that's the Mailer work ethic.

"I'm more and more interested as I get older and older in doing the work I still can do," Mailer said on the phone the other day. "I'm not as

interested in fights as I once was. I used to enjoy a fight. Now I look at (a fight) as something that's going to use up a lot of the little working time I probably have left. I don't want to get to the point where I'm frantic about the working time."

Mailer is on the short list of American literature's most accomplished living writers, along with the likes of Philip Roth, John Updike, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Toni Morrison, E.L. Doctorow, Tom Wolfe, Cormac McCarthy and John Irving. There's actually a Norman Mailer Society, which assembles each year for a conference to discuss the man and his writing. (This year's meeting is Oct. 11-13 in Provincetown, Mass.)

Amazingly, Mailer has been consistently productive and in the national consciousness during the decades since becoming a sensation with his landmark World War II novel, "The Naked and the Dead," published in 1948 when he was just 25.

Since then, Mailer has worked as a novelist, journalist, poet, film director (and actor and producer, and as adviser on the boxing movie "Million Dollar Baby"), screenplay writer, playwright, newspaper editor (he co-founded the Village Voice in 1954), essayist, anti-war protestor, would-be politician (he ran for mayor of New York, proposing that the city secede from the Union and become the 51st state) and, perhaps above all, a combative provocateur never far from the public eye or the

stage of controversial self-aggrandizement.

Why, the man was plain shocking, maybe even criminal. One time, during a late-night cocktail party, he stabbed his second wife (Adele Morales) in the abdomen with a penknife. At another cocktail party, Mailer the amateur pugilist invited McGeorge Bundy to a fistfight (at the time, Bundy was President Lyndon Johnson's national security adviser).

Mailer's books from the 1950s and '60s had come under fire by the feminist movement for their sexism and misogyny, culminating with Kate Millett's strident "Sexual Politics" in 1970. Mailer "replied" to the charges in 1971 with "Prisoners of Sex," an anti-feminist diatribe that fueled that bitter, much-publicized war between the genders.

Oh, the controversies. But let's not overlook his brilliance. Mailer holds a National Book Award and two Pulitzer Prizes, and was awarded the 2005 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters by the National Book Foundation. He helped pioneer the literary style known as the "nonfiction novel" or New Journalism, along with Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote. He has debated with some of the 20th century's keenest minds (including conservative columnist-novelist William F. Buckley Jr.) and won by KO as often as not. Before serving in the Army in the South Pacific in World War II, Mailer graduated from Harvard Uni-

versity (aeronautical engineering). After the war, he graduated from the Sorbonne in Paris.

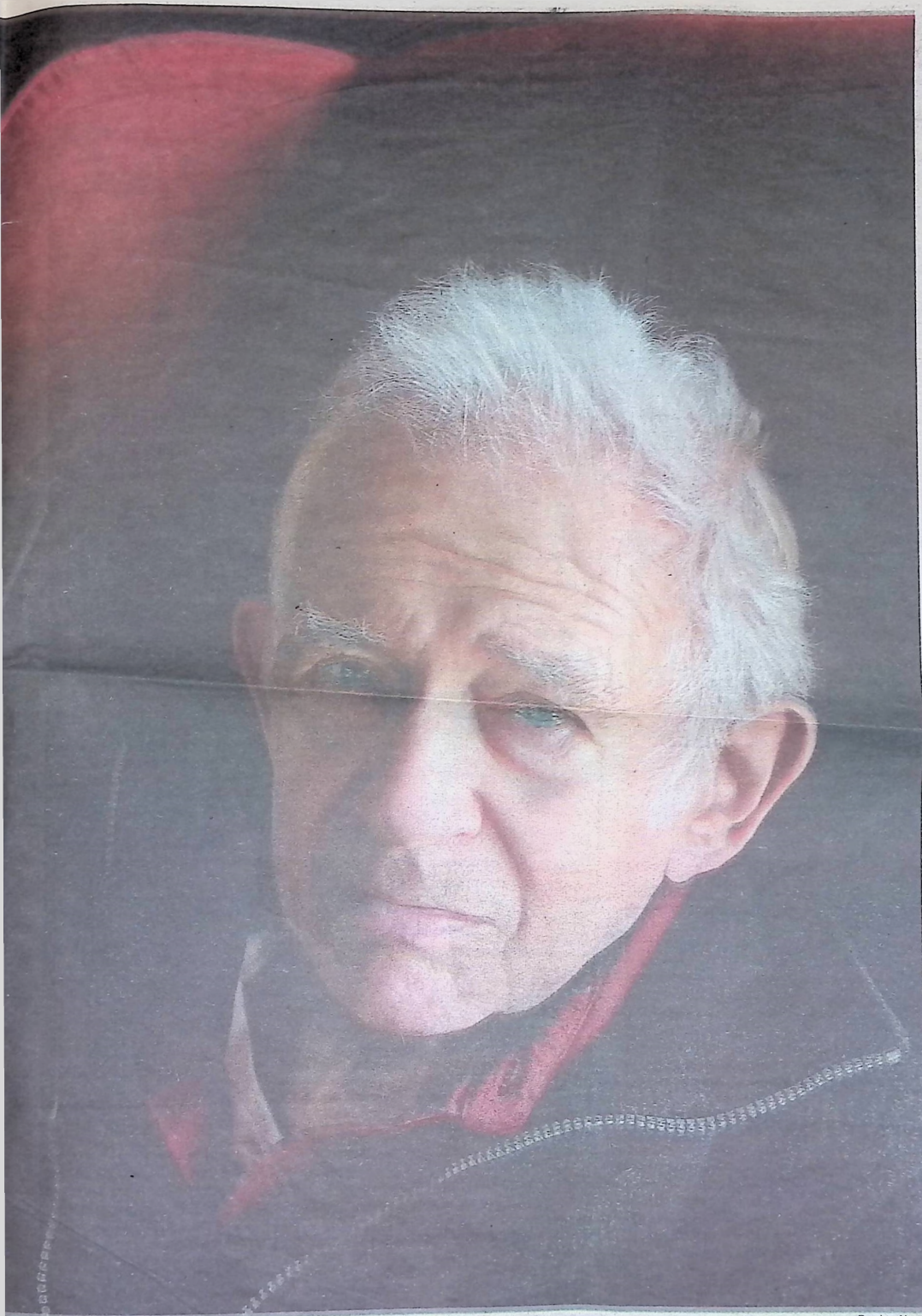
Mailer's range of interests and his expertise in reporting on them have been remarkable. For instance, he has written about the Apollo 11 moon landing, Marilyn Monroe, Pablo Picasso, Henry Miller, Lee Harvey Oswald, the Ali-Foreman heavyweight championship fight in Zaire, the life and execution of murderer Gary Gilmore, the 1968 anti-Vietnam War protests in Washington, D.C., the Republican and Democratic national conventions of 1968, the Hollywood moviemaking establishment, Egypt between 1290 and 1100 B.C., the CIA and, of course, sex, drugs, liquor, money, fame and rock 'n' roll.

Mailer was born in Long Branch, N.J., and grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y. His current residence is a century-old oceanfront house on Cape Cod, Mass., where he lives with his wife of 30 years — his sixth — Arkansas-born artist-writer Norris Church Mailer (a.k.a. Barbara Davis). Mailer has nine adult children.

Mailer is touring and making appearances to promote "The Castle in the Forest" and will speak at the Crest Theatre today. His appearance was added to the California Lectures series lineup after writer Joan Didion canceled her scheduled visit.

His handlers at Random House, his longtime publisher, allotted 20 min-

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Random House

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All of us live with psychic landmines in our selves. And very often when we get bored with a book, it's because there's something there that's beginning to disturb us. So in preference to being disturbed ... we get bored."

Norman Mailer

Mailer today at the Crest

Norman Mailer will appear at 2 p.m. today at the Crest Theatre, 1013 K St., (916) 442-7378, as part of the California Lecture Series. Mailer will discuss his new novel, "The Castle in the Forest" (Random House, \$27.95, 496 pages). Joining Mailer onstage will be columnist-memoirist Joyce Maynard.

At 1 p.m., a pre-show biographical overview of Mailer and his works will be conducted by Sheree Meyer, the chairwoman of the CSUS English Department.

Tickets are \$30 at the Crest box office.

As for ticket availability, "Some tickets most likely will be available at the door today," said Suzette Riddle, founder and president of the California Lecture Series. For more information: (916) 737-1300 or www.californialectures.org.

BOOKS

Mailer

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utes for this telephone conversation:

Q: You wrote about Jesus in "The Gospel According to the Son," and now your narrator in "Castle" is a demon from hell. Do you believe in God and Satan?

A: Oh, yeah, that's easy. I believe in God not as a lawgiver, not as a fundamentalist. I'm very anti-fundamentalist. Fundamentalism was put together by human beings to protect themselves from their fears and to give them a narrow way to live that they found is crucial to their beliefs.

I believe that God's the greatest creator of them all. He created us and he created this universe. But God is not all good and not all-powerful. And I also believe there is a devil, an evil presence (that is) opposed to God's efforts.

Q: No surprise that "Castle" is receiving mixed reviews. How is it that book critics presume to think they know more about books than the authors who write them?

A: I could say any number of nasty things. ... It's what they do, and they pride themselves on the speed at which they can come to a decision.

They're not there to say, "This book is a complex book and I'm not sure where I am." Book reviewers can do that maybe once a year, but if they start doing it every day, they get fired. The job itself almost dictates the nature of it.

Also, most of us are slightly meaner than we are good. So there's more pleasure for the average reader in a bad review than a good one.

I mean, look at Michiko Kakutani at the New York Times. She loves trashing the best male American writers and does it all the time. There are any number of people who love her work for that reason. Whenever a really talented writer is trashed, people who are lesser writers can say to themselves, "I have a chance." I think some book reviewers cater to that.

There are a few who bring a little honor to the profession, but they are not that many. There used to be a wonderful one at the New York Times named Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, who was a serious book reviewer (and author) and did his job. Also (the late) Clifton Fadiman (of the New Yorker magazine).

What I hate about reviewers like Michiko Kakutani is they're all attitude. You don't know what they stand for. All they say is, "This book bores me." Well, very often if you're bored by a book, it could be your fault.

All of us live with psychic landmines in our selves. And very often when we get bored with a book, it's because there's something there that's beginning to disturb us. So in preference to being disturbed – which means we might have to face something unhappy about ourselves – we get bored. And there is a kind of book reviewer who says no more than,

"This book bores me." And very often they're dead wrong.

Q: Generally, our dumb-down popular culture embraces video games over novels.

A: The novel has taken a hit, and I think the good novel has taken the largest hit. TV has done a lot of damage to the novel because it's so much easier to watch TV or play (a video game) than it is to read.

Q: Your longtime war in the 1970s with the women's movement is something by which you're still defined.

A: There's no longer any assault by either side. I've no desire to go on with that war, and my hope is that they don't, either. I don't think I won. I do think the woman's movement accomplished a huge amount in the early years. But like all revolutions, it had an ugly side. And that ugly side also prevailed to some degree. But I don't want to get into it because I don't want to start the war all over again.

Q: New York Sen. Hillary Clinton and Illinois Sen. Barack Obama both intend to occupy the White House. What's going to happen?

A: I'll name one (outcome) prematurely, which is Hillary for president and Obama for vice president. To me, that makes the most political sense at the moment. Obviously, the people who love Obama will be infuriated, and Hillary might not want to have a vice president who is more appealing to the American public than herself. Nonetheless, politically that's a strong ticket.

Q: What's the state of the Union?

A: We have this great democracy and we're doing our best to wreck it in a hurry.

One of the paramount things in a democracy is that the leader of a country like this should be well-spoken in English, so that everybody wishes to speak English in a way that's better than they did before. And now we've got a president who, long before Iraq, couldn't speak decent English. He was and is a simpleton when it came to speaking aloud. He works only with clichés, which is horrible in a leader. He doesn't fulfill the first function of a leader, which is to improve the mind of the nation.

At bottom, George Bush is nothing but a cheerleader. He hasn't changed since he was in school.

Q: Your heroes include Muhammad Ali, Ernest Hemingway and Fidel Castro.

A: Castro is a hero. He set sail for Cuba with 81 men. He landed in the wrong place and all but 16 (of his band) were caught in an ambush and killed. They traipsed into the wild and that night – with a light glowing in his eyes – Castro says, "The days of the dictatorship are numbered."

One of the men with him wrote later, "I

thought our leader was mad." Nonetheless, he prevailed. If that isn't heroic, I don't know what the hell heroism is.

By the way, I think one of the reasons why no American president has gone near Castro is they all felt a secret shame in relation to him. I mean, they got to be president in greater or lesser degree by shaking hands with people they couldn't stand and by kissing you-know-what all the time, because that's part of American politics. Castro did it through his strength, his virility if you will. And they can't forgive him for that.

Q: Will the world see another Norman Mailer book?

A: I hope it will, but how can I promise that? It's late in the day. At my age, you can keep over from anything at any time. Another book means another three or four years. I hope I can write one. I'd like to. If I do, there's a very good chance it would be (a continuation of the Hitler story). But I'm not going to promise it. In my life, I've made too many promises about books I would write that I didn't keep, and I don't want to make any more.

Q: Has age brought new wisdom?

A: Old age is kind of cool if you're in reasonable health. My knees are no good and my eyesight and hearing aren't too hot, but I sleep reasonably well at night – just like George Bush.

So old age is enjoyable in that you sort of know what you want for the rest of your years and you know what you're not going to do. You're not as prone to folly, you're not as prone to rages.

I'm over nine-tenths of the envy that fueled so many of my actions for so many years. In that sense, I'm probably an easier human being to deal with than I used to be. I've had a lot of attitudes over the years and, some of them I would still defend. Others I would probably say, "Well, I was a little over the top there."

Q: Looking back at your career ...

A: I feel I've had a life. Mind you, while I was having a life, it never seemed to me enough life, because we're never satisfied with the life we have. That's part of being human.

But looking back on it now – maybe this is one of the advantages of being older – I feel I really have no right to complain. I've had a life that's been reasonably interesting, and that's all you can ever ask for.

Q: Perhaps the reason it was interesting was because of the fires burning in your belly.

A: Well, when you have a fire burning in your belly, as you put it, what happens if you don't find a way to use that fire? Then you become tormented. So I consider myself fortunate that I was able to use whatever was working away in me.

The Bee's Allen Pierleoni can be reached at (916) 321-1128 or apierleoni@sacbee.com.

Mailer's works

Some debate exists over the exact number of works by Norman Mailer, which include fiction, nonfiction, essays, collections, plays and poetry. This is the Mailer bibliography as compiled by the Norman Mailer Society:

The Naked and the Dead (1948)
Barbary Shore (1951)
The Deer Park (1955)
The White Negro (1959)
Advertisements for Myself (1959)
Deaths for the Ladies (1962)
The Presidential Papers (1963)
An American Dream (1965)
Cannibals and Christians (1966)
The Short Fiction of Norman Mailer (1967)
The Deer Park: A Play (1967)
Why Are We in Vietnam? (1967)
The Bullfight: A Photographic Narrative With Text by Norman Mailer (1967)
The Armies of the Night (1968)
The Idol and the Octopus (1968)
Miami and the Siege of Chicago (1968)
Of a Fire on the Moon (1971)
King of the Hill (1971)
The Prisoner of Sex (1971)
Maidstone: A Mystery (1971)
The Long Patrol (1971)
Existential Errands (1972)
St. George and the Godfather (1972)
Marilyn: A Biography (1973)
The Faith of Graffiti (1974)
The Fight (1975)
Some Honorable Men (1976)
Genius and Lust (1976)
A Transit to Narcissus (1978)
The Executioner's Song (1979)
Of Women and Their Elegance (1980)
Pieces and Pontifications (1982)
Ancient Evenings (1983)
Tough Guys Don't Dance (1984)
Conversations With Norman Mailer (1988)
Harlot's Ghost (1991)
Oswald's Tale (1995)
Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man (1995)
The Gospel According to the Son (1997)
The Time of Our Time (1998)
The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing (2003)
Modest Gifts: Poems and Drawings (2003)
Why Are We at War? (2003)
Norman Mailer's Letters on An American Dream (2004)
The Big Empty (2006)
The Castle in the Forest (2007)