

Mailer's Hitler study leads him to God and the devil

By John Freeman

There was a time when Norman Mailer used to talk about the Big Book. The subject, like a white whale, prowled the interviews he gave in the 1950s, blasting into view and then diving down into the darkness, where it would lurk until the next publication date.

With each decade, and each new book, from "The American Dream" to "Executioner's Song," it seemed as if Mailer might still drag his promised catch to shore.

Though Joan Didion concludes Mailer finally got his big trophy — four times in fact — the lion remains unconvinced. And at 84, America's most pugilistic novelist has done something unusual. He's beginning to say he may not get it.

INTERVIEW

"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, the fishing village turned weekend retreat at Cape Cod's tip. "But I'm not going to stick to those predictions."

What's unusual is Mailer is making this pronouncement 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 D.T., an assistant to the devil himself.

Mailer has worked on the book long enough to lose track of when he started exactly. In the interim, his knees have gone out, meaning he now walks with the aid of two canes. During the course of the interview he does not stand.

"There was one early review that was essentially favorable, but it irritated the hell

out of me," he says, revealing a flash of his former feistiness, his smile turning wicked. "Let's say it irritated the s— out of me. Because the reviewer said in some long-winded way, of course Mailer is just rewriting Freud."

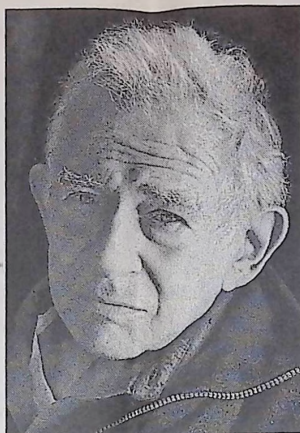
"Why? Because I paid attention to toilet training. Well, as a father of eight children I do know a little bit about toilet training."

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, and a friend in Havana. Large windows open onto the bay and the ocean beyond.

In this comfortable setting, it seems odd that Mailer should be so compelled to delve back down into "the reek of the urine, the s—, and the blood of Luther," so manifest throughout "The Castle in the Forest."

But as reviews have noted, that's exactly what he has done. This is a fascinating, exceptionally dirty book that also happens to want to turn the clock of America's cosmology back some 60 years: Mailer believes the world is run by a threesome — God, man and the devil — and that Hitler was the devil's response to Jesus Christ.

The most vivid scene of "The Castle in the Forest" involves Hitler's bawdy, raucous, incestuous conception — with the devil inserting himself into young Adolf's soul at the moment of his parents' climax. As provocative as this sounds, Mailer says he is not being facetious. "We can understand Josef Stalin in a way," he says. "One of the things about Stalin is that he was one



CHRISTINA PABST

Norman Mailer's new book is "The Castle in the Forest."

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 he believes works all the time. "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. Something he says his mother acknowledged early on. "My mother was very affected by Hitler," he says. "When I was 9 years old, she knew already, long be-

fore the statesmen did, that Hitler was a disaster and a monster. That he was probably going to kill half the Jews, if not all of them."

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 that book came to him 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 that "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. For starters, spending time with a very bad man was not a problem, as he learned 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."

Mailer used to put in marathon writing sessions, but has become used to five, six hours at a stretch, sometimes without lunch if he became absorbed. Although the book contains an extensive bibliography, Mailer was pleased to be plowing the dark, too. "There is very little known about Hitler's childhood," he says. "He concealed much of it, to the best of his best

ability." So Mailer ad-libbed. Long ago, Mailer might have felt some apprehension going to this project, knowing the kind of reviews it would spark. Now he says he doesn't care. "One of the advantages of getting old, is you really don't give a f— anymore. What are they going to do, come and kill me? Fine, make a martyr of me! Make me immortal!"

As a Jewish writer, he says he has also long been ready to approach Hitler with a cool head. "I remember the first time I visited Germany in the '50s I was very much on edge." But not now. And with current events going the way they are, Mailer says there might be a lesson here for Americans. "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's rise to power. Conditions made it possible, too, and so vigilance is key. "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 says, continuing to rattle 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?" ■

John Freeman is president of the National Book Critics Circle.

Food brings a taste of acceptance

Stealing Buddha's Dinner

By Bich Minh Nguyen
VIKING, 257 PAGES, \$24.95

Reviewed by Michael Rose

There's something about the food on TV.

How every slice of pizza appears perfect, with green peppers and pepperoni in equal proportion and melted mozzarella stretched out to



PORTER SHIREVE

Bich Minh Nguyen

kids that "You're cruisin' for a bruisin'" and answer personal questions with a perfunctory "None of your business." Bich's story unfolds in anecdotes: the time she was at a friend's house for dinner and sat at the head of the table because she didn't know better, the time the

on her neighbors having scalloped potatoes for dinner. In "Toll House Cookies," after stealing a few chocolate chip cookies from her neighbor's kitchen, she writes, "I knew the cookies would stay with me forever... each chocolate chip a reminder of the toll, the price of admission into a long-desired house. How I wanted such entrance through cookies, through candy and cake, popsicles, ice cream, endless kinds of dinner. I wanted all of it, and hated to be hungry."

Such clever turns of phrase make Nguyen's book read quickly, and children of the '80s will be able to reminisce about pop culture along with her. (Remember how you could say "Whopper beat the Big Mac" and get a free burger? Remember obscure game shows like "Sale of the Century"? But the memories aren't always pleasant. At Burger King, Bich is coerced by her

Lifting the veil on a new world power

In Spite of the Gods

The Strange Rise of Modern India
By Edward Luce

DOUBLEDAY, 383 PAGES, \$26

Reviewed by Kelly McEvers

It's been said that we citizens of the world know more about each other than ever before — that in a few short decades, globalization and its millions of miles of fiber-optic cable have allowed us unprecedented access to the most remote parts of the world.

That said, anyone who has worked or traveled outside the United States might argue that

world transcend materialism. India, André tells the author, is "the key to the survival of the human race."

But what, Luce muses, about the millions of impoverished people within India's borders? How will the Aurobindo community — or, for that matter, the Indian state — help them? The World Bank says roughly one-third of India's more than 1 billion people live below the poverty line. André insists he's not worried. India, after all, is exceptional.

It's a telling scene. As Luce's title suggests, his approach is much less sentimental than the Frenchman's. Unlike countless visitors to the subcontinent over the centuries, Luce is neither en-

na, as the world's next great economic power. Luce offers apt differences: India's population remains stubbornly rural; China's is increasingly urban. India's economy is driven by the service sector; China's by manufacturing. India's literacy rate is 65 percent; China's is nearly 90 percent.

Add to that India's strict labor laws and reluctance to allow foreign investment, Luce says, and it explains why China is the clear leader in the economic-growth race. But Luce also contends that India holds some advantages. One is the country's long-standing commitment to higher education.

Despite its lagging literacy rate, India graduates 1 million engineers each year, compared with