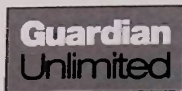


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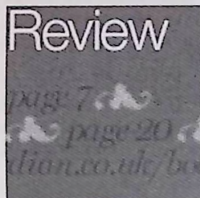
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**Devil's plaything**

Norman Mailer's *The Castle in the Forest* an electrifying inquiry into the nature of evil, says Beryl Bainbridge

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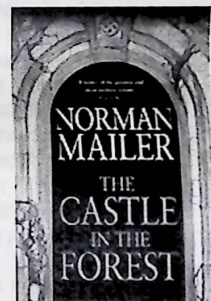
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Saturday February 10, 2007

[The Guardian](#)**The Castle in the Forest**

by Norman Mailer

496pp, Little, Brown, £17.99



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Modern thinking would have us believe that no one is born bad. An infant doesn't come into the world endowed with a predisposition towards cruelty and murder; such base attributes are down to parental influences, chance circumstances and economic factors. Norman Mailer's electrifying and peculiar new novel provides a different explanation, that of the intervention of the forces of evil.

The narrator, who at the beginning of the book goes by the name of Dieter, a blond, elite member of the SS in the service of Heinrich Himmler, is a devil in the higher employ of an entity called the Maestro, a being who may or may not be Satan. Against the rules Dieter has decided to write a history of Alois Schicklgruber, a peasant born in the northern part of lower Austria in 1837, whose life the Maestro, for certain reasons, has instructed him to study and influence.

In this section[Critical eye: Feb 10](#)

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Alois was brutal, pompous, sexually rampant, possibly half-Jewish and certainly illegitimate; he was married three times, lastly to a woman called Klara, with whom, so the rumour goes, he shared a grandfather. There is no proof of this, but in order to marry her Alois had to obtain a dispensation from the Pope. The records show them to be second cousins. Though never faithful to her, Alois loved Klara in his own bullying way. As the narrator observes: "The proper study of marriage lies not only in partnership, affection, boredom, verbal scuffles and daily despair, but in the guts and smear of it all, the comradely knowledge of all the forbidden tastes, smells and bodily nooks." He then quotes the words of St Odon of Cluny: "Through shit and piss we are born," reinforcing the devil's intimacy with excretion in all its forms, physical and mental.

Alois was the first social climber in his family. In 1855, at the age of 18, he had gained employment, at a modest grade, with the Austrian ministry of finance. Twenty years later he was appointed customs inspector of Braunau am Inn. A year on he was made legitimate when the parish priest of Dollersheim struck the name Schicklgruber from the birth register and replaced it with Hitler. Possibly the devil had something to do with that as well, for the original name does not slip from the tongue so easily when prefaced with "Heil".

Alois and Klara were married in 1885. Alois already had two living offspring, the first being Alois junior, who was later to elope from Ireland with a girl called Bridget and settle in Liverpool, where their son, William Patrick, was born (in a house in Stanhope Street, round the corner

From: EzraBongo@aol.com
Subject: **A Rose is a Rose is a Rose**
Date: February 6, 2007 10:54:45 AM EST
To: nmncm@comcast.net
Cc: EzraBongo@aol.com

February 6, 2007

Dear Norman,

Most nights, as spirit midnight presses hard, I am on my way to "work", soul and body thoroughly out of sync, my most precious thoughts scattering as birds at a shotgun blast, missing much, regretting more. Last night, one of my two coveted late nights off, when thrall yields to person, I was just about to fall into exhausted sleep when a brief channel surf revealed, *spot* on time, you and Charlie Rose. Joy in Mudville!

The sparkle in your eyes at these meetings could light a movie set. Whatever the particulars as decade spans decade, the two of you are like a great double play combination: Tinker and Evers, Reese and Robinson, Aparicio and Fox--stretching, tossing, covering the bag--poetry in motion. If I smiled any harder, my face would break.

When, however, kidding on the square, you alluded to the "ping pong ball" rolling off the table, it was hard to share the humor without a doleful nod to the wings, the 800 pound gorilla whose grunting cue leads king and pope, pundit, poet and president (not soon *enough* for *this* one) to that remove from which they regard also-rans like me whose greatest fortune was simple acquaintance with the *least* simple of men.

Would to God, dear friend, that these eyes, these ears, these strong but aimless knees could be *yours* for greater use than I can ever give them, each seven of my canine years scarce one of yours. If men lived in proportion to their worth, not all the forests in the world could keep you in canes.

I'm sorry that my latest bag of wind did not address "The Castle in the Forest" more closely, but tap-danced glibly as poor writers do, a cowardly effort perhaps to mask my confusion, for while my enjoyment was great, my attention certainly rapt at a master novelist in consummate control, I confess that I kept waiting for the saga of Alois (and was a baser man ever more ennobled by such voluminous attention?) to give way to sonny boy's sudden, meteoric rise. Most especially on the splendid Russian excursions, I thought "What is he *doing*, where is he *going*, how will he find the *time*?" It was much the same feeling that I had going into the last two dozen pages of "Tough Guys", when I thought "How in hell

is he going to tie off all these *loose ends*?!

But of course, you *did*, as of course you *will*, not in "Hitler's Mother", but in "Klara's Son", wherein Hitler's greatest biographers will be subsumed by America's greatest writer, straddling history and fiction like a hobby horse and giving it wings. If you could wrest such towering drama from a wretch like Gary Gilmore, then there is no reason why the fusion of Hitler and Mailer should not cause your next (I refuse to say *last*) work to put the literary world on its ass for generations to come, an alchemy of brilliance and evil to make young writers despair.

Pardon me if I *kvell*, but any talk of your mortality quite upsets me. To snatch a line from Hamlet, there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in my philosophy, and in those places I have never known a more prescient guide. Old Man, next to my own dear father, know that I surely love you best, and view the intervals between our meetings as the gaps between stars: daunting in their distance, but brilliant in their promise.

Hoping to see you this Spring,

Sal

From: "Lynnea Benson" <lynneapoo@msn.com>
Subject: **ART/NY**
Date: January 31, 2007 1:41:11 PM EST
To: nmncm@comcast.net

Dear Norris and Norman,

Hi, I hope you remember me. My name is Lynnea Benson. Ted Zurkowski and I founded that little gem of a theatre company, The Frog & Peach?

Congratulations on The Castle in the Forest! Ted won't let it out of his hands until he's finished but I've got next dibs on it. The excerpts I've read on-line are delicious, and I can't wait for my turn.

We're still married somehow, and even though ol' TZ is taking a break from Shakespeare to write, Frog and Peach is going strong. We've got a great cast lined up for a staged reading of Julius Caesar, hopefully this May. It's an important play to do right now, we feel, especially if you're the type who reads Animal Farm and thinks the sheep are the worst of the lot.

I'll spare you the company ups and downs, and get to my urgent request. We need a letter of recommendation from outside the company in order to qualify for this certain group of grants (ART/NY). I recall that you have seen some of our work. Your voices would give great value to our request.

While it's gratifying to get the rave reviews and to work with big names, our most valuable mission is to bring our exciting, bloody, sexy productions of Shakespeare free of charge to the non-Lincoln Center crowd.

We'd like to be more involved with the Board of Ed, and your letter to this particular grant organization would help us to slice through some of the byzantine pork to bring in say, Austin Pendleton to do Shylock for a big group, or Catalina Sandino Moreno (Maria Full of Grace) to do Lady M.

Just reading Shakespeare in middle school pulled me through some awfully tough times. I know I share this with lots of people. But now I'm in a position to give some of that back.

I so hope you want to participate, and again, congratulations on the beautiful Castle in the Forest.

Sincerely,

Lynnea Benson
Artistic Director
The Frog & Peach Theatre Co., Inc
646 351 7450 c
212 866 7280 h

From: John Hemingway <jhn_hemingway@yahoo.com>
Subject: **Re: Michael and Jackie**
Date: January 30, 2007 2:43:00 PM EST
To: Norris Mailer <nmncm@comcast.net>

Ciao Norris,
HOpe you're having a great 2007:-) I survived my first christmas out of Italy since 1990 and discovered that all the kids around here get their presents on Los Reyes (the sixth of January) and not christmas for the most part!

I'm writing also because my editor was wondering if Norman still wanted to do a blurb for my book and if so, when he thought that he might be sending it along. A part from that, all goes well with the book. It'll be out this Spring and I'll be over there to publicize it, when we shall meet again, no doubt:-)

love to you and the family,
JOhn

--- Norris Mailer <nmncm@comcast.net> wrote:

What adorable children! They are at such a fun age. you did good,
Mr. Hemingway. But I suspect you had a little help.
XX Norris

On Nov 8, 2006, at 1:10 AM, John Hemingway wrote:

| Here's one of our daughter Jacqueline with her
| school
| halloween mask still on and one with Jackie and
| her
| brother Michael.
| cheers,
| John

--- Norris Mailer <nmncm@comcast.net> wrote:

| John is a screen writer, too. Michael is the
| producer in the family.
| Stephen is an actor, and the rest are painters or
| actors or writers
| one way or the other, too. Sue is a
| psychotherapist, who keeps the
| rest of us in check. XX N

| On Nov 7, 2006, at 11:22 AM, John Hemingway
| wrote:

| |
| | Movie in my book? Well, that would be nice, but
| at

| | this point I'd settle just for the book doing
| | well:-)

| | Is John Buffalo a movie producer? Or a screen

From: CEPabst@aol.com
Subject: Re:
Date: February 9, 2007 9:09:49 AM EST
To: nmncm@comcast.net

Darling,

If he could sign it

"To James, Happy Birthday, Norman Mailer"

That would be perfect. Just send it to me at P.O. Box 2151 neenah Wi 54957 Thank you so much, Darling. Wouldn't even bother you with it if Carol had not done so much for me.

I was giving the move some thought and wondered if you would like me to come the first week of March or a little bit later to help. Would be a nice break for me too so don't go all Southern on me about putting me out. I could help with Momma.

Love Sistah Stella

Christina
wants a book
for a friend

from where I lived in the 60s). A second child, Angela, was born less than two months after his second wedding to Fanni Matzelberger; a year later, when Fanni died, aged 23, Klara was already pregnant. She and Alois had three children who died in infancy, Gustav, Ida and Otto. Then, at half past six on the evening of April 20, 1889, a chilly Easter of gloomy skies, a fourth was born. They named him Adolf.

The Castle in the Forest is not about the barbaric individual who caused the extermination of millions, but is rather the story of a child within his family. The insights into the life Hitler led when young are so skilfully told that one cannot be certain what is fact and what is fiction. There's a chapter in which the family dog, affrighted by his master's rage, craps on the floor and receives a beating. Klara, fearful that baby Adolf's excretions will cause offence, becomes over-zealous in wiping his bottom. It is recorded that Hitler, a victim of his bowel training, frequently farted when ranting to the crowds. Mailer's novel is full of smells, vile odours manufactured by Satan.

Alois senior showed more affection to Alois junior than to young Adolf, understandably seeing that his eldest child was a chip off the old block. Adolf had inherited some of Klara's genes, was weak, unsure of himself and so, Dieter would have us believe, was an easier target for the infection of evil.

Alois senior had an odd hobby, that of bee-keeping, and when Alois junior left home it was Adolf who took his place. His father, as though attracting the attention of a dog, would whistle for him, and together they would sit in the shade of the oak tree and watch the movements of the bees. Young Adolf sat for hours listening to the hum of the honey-making insects, watched in wonder as the queen soared into the skies for her murderous act of procreation. Once, Alois neglected one of the hives and the insects began to die; fearful the cause was a disease that might spread, Alois gassed them.

As Adolf grew older, bullied at school and at home, the Maestro ordered Dieter to "stiffen the boy's spine, etch visions of power upon his dreams". Filled with a sense of importance and a belief that he could see into the future, Adolf began to assert himself; he organised games of cowboys and Indians in the woods about his home, and at school he was seduced by the writings of Frederick Jahn, who spoke of a force that in the future would depend on a Führer cast of Iron and Fire. There was a sentence that

brought tears to his eyes: "The people will honour him and forgive all his sins."

On the last page Maller reveals the meaning of his book's title. Translated into German it becomes Walderschloss, a name given to their hell-hole by the inmates of the concentration camp at Dachau. This unforgettable novel by a master of prose reinforces the belief that we kid ourselves if we lay the blame for hideous crimes on one single individual, even if it is the devil. We are all culpable.

• Beryl Bainbridge's *Young Adolf* is published by Abacus

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RANDOM HOUSE

BERTELSMANN

HI NORMAN!

SORRY I MISSED YOUR CALL YESTERDAY BUT I AM THRILLED THAT ALL IS GOING WELL.

CHARLIE ROSE AIRED LAST NIGHT AND THE SHOW WAS SUPER - THEY INCLUDED THE LINE AT THE END WHERE HE SAYS "IF WE'RE OFF THE AIR, I WANT TO SAY, YOU ARE BETTER THAN EVER" AND YOU SAY "I HOPE WE ARE STILL ON THE AIR!" WHICH WAS A HILARIOUS WAY TO WRAP IT UP, AND UNUSUAL FOR CHARLIE TO KEEP SOMETHING SO FUNNY ON HIS DAMNED BORING SHOW. ANYHOW I THOUGHT IT WAS GREAT, I COULDN'T BELIEVE CHARLIE ACTUALLY ASKED ABOUT YOUR BOOK THE WHOLE TIME, AND THAT HE ACTUALLY LET YOU DO THE TALKING.

I AM FAXING YOU ONE ESPECIALLY GREAT NEW REVIEW. THE OTHER NEW ARTICLES I HAVE IN ARE ALL NICE FEATURES THAT I'LL SEND ALONG TO YOU LATER.

LASTLY, REMEMBER YOU ARE FLYING TO BOSTON NEXT THURSDAY FOR YOUR BOOKSTORE EVENT THERE. THE BOSTON GLOBE WANTS TO SITDOWN WITH YOU FOR A FEATURE INTERVIEW THAT THURSDAY AFTERNOON, IF YOU WOULD FEEL UP TO IT. THE REPORTER DAVID MEHEGAN IS A VERY SMART REPORTER AND DOES SUPERB FEATURES. DAVID IS ALSO WILLING TO DRIVE OUT TO P-TOWN TO INTERVIEW YOU, IF YOU THINK THAT DAY IN BOSTON WILL BE TIRING ENOUGH AS IT IS.

ANYHOW HOPE TO TALK SOON & ENJOY THE BEL AIR!

XOXX JYNNE

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Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, Florida)

February 4, 2007 Sunday
Broward Metro Edition

HEART OF DARKNESS; IN HIS FIRST NOVEL IN 10 YEARS, NORMAN MAILER HAS DELIVERED A BOLD AND AUDACIOUS EXPLORATION OF THE GENESIS OF EVIL.

SECTION: AETV; Pg. 17

LENGTH: 1131 words

The Castle in the Forest. Norman Mailer. Random House. \$27.95. 477 pp.

Norman Mailer's first novel in 10 years, *The Castle in the Forest*, is a work of such audacity that many readers, and, doubtless, not a few critics, are likely to be so offended by its method and means that the extent of its novelistic achievement will be lost on them.

More's the pity, for readers capable of meeting it on its own terms will find *The Castle in the Forest* a source of tremendous narrative pleasure, even if some passages may best be read, as it were, between the fingers of a hand clapped protectively across the eyes.

On the surface, *The Castle in the Forest* is a ridiculous project, one that seeks to locate the source of evil in a fictionalized childhood biography of that great antichrist of the 20th century, Adolf Hitler.

What's more, in a gambit breathtaking in its boldness, Mailer tells the story through the first-person narration of a mid-level demon, an infernal functionary assigned by Satan to shepherd the development of an obscure boy, born of an incestuous bloodline, with the potential for great accomplishments in the continuing battle between the Devil and God.

The evil of Hitler, of course, and the power of his pernicious achievement, has proven one of the imponderables of modern history. Whole forests have gone to provide the pages of nonfiction books seeking to explain the rise of the little Austrian mediocrity by way of Freudian psychology, political history, occult analysis, German ethnocentrism, and almost any other discipline or theory you may think of.

And yet, Hitler remains inexplicable. Survivors of the Holocaust, their advocates and descendants, may perhaps be the most ready to locate Hitler's power outside the realm of humanity, labeling him a literal fiend. Sadly, though understandable, this thesis lacks explanatory power, leaving us defenseless against the rise of a next Hitler.

As Joseph Conrad wrote in his 1911 novel, *Under Western Eyes*, "The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness."

Mailer surely knows of Conrad's famous remark, and it is impossible to credit the notion he actually believes demons and angels influence human affairs. His selection of a demonic point-of-view character to relate his tale, therefore, constitutes a defiant, almost foolhardy, means to attack the impenetrableness of Hitler's life and personality.

But it works beautifully, for it challenges every received assumption. It is akin to drawing a mustache on the Mona Lisa; it allows you to see the subject anew.

Indeed, the diabolic narrator is aware of such considerations:

"Given the present authority of the scientific world," muses the demon, "most well-educated people are ready to bridle at the notion of such an entity as the Devil. They have even less readiness to accept the cosmic drama of an ongoing conflict between Satan and the Lord. The modern tendency is to believe that such speculation is a medieval nonsense happily extirpated centuries ago by the Enlightenment."

After prattling on in such vein for a few more sentences, our narrator concludes, "There need be no surprise, then, that the world has an impoverished understanding of Adolf Hitler's personality. Detestation, yes, but understanding of him, no -- he is, after all, the most mysterious human being of the century. Nonetheless, I would say that I can comprehend his psyche. He was my client. I followed his life from infancy a long way into his development as the wild beast of the century, this all-too-modest-looking politician with his snippet of a mustache."

The strength and joy of Mailer's narrative -- if such a word as "joy" can yet be affixed to a novel about Hitler -- is two-fold. First, however much fun he has, Mailer plays it straight. He never winks at the reader; if he did the entire fantastic edifice would collapse into ruins.

Second, Mailer develops his portrait of Hitler's home life with the detail of a very good 19th-century domestic drama. Indeed, the true hero of the book is Alois, the father who rose from peasantry to become a distinguished government bureaucrat, a lover of women and begetter of bastards, a deeply flawed man who devoted his retirement to apiculture -- the keeping of bees and the harvesting of honey -- at which he proved, to his regret, barely competent.

Every character in Mailer's narrative lives and breathes as a fully developed human being, including little "Adj," even if the botched toilet training, the budding sexual perversities, the secret malice toward friends and family, the incipient talent for persuasion, the profound insecurities and their resultant dishonesties, fail to quite explain the monster he became, although they do lay the ground work for a proposed sequel, which presumably will follow Hitler to his alienated young manhood in Vienna, where, nursing resentments and monomaniacal obsessions, he discovered politics.

While we await that book, *The Castle in the Forest* stands on its own, an accomplished mash-up of C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, a Christian comedy of devilry, and, say, *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary*, a serious psychological domestic drama. But I mean here to give merely a hint of its flavor. The novel is Mailer through and through, the work of a bold and confident writer who may yet be seen as the pre-eminent novelist of his time.

Mailer, now 83, may be regarded as swinging for the fences one last time, but then, when has he not? He has always been the least Jewish of Jewish American novelists, which is curious, for much of his career coincided with the rise of such Jewish literary paragons as Bernard Malamud, Isaac Singer, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow. Indeed, during the period of the 1950s through the 1970s, Jewish literature and American literature were virtually one and the same.

And yet Mailer never sought to clamber aboard that bandwagon, nor any other. He has always gone his own way as a determinedly American writer, of enormous intellect, talent and vigor, who only incidentally happened to be Jewish. Unlike his contemporaries mentioned above, he seldom wrote about overtly Jewish subjects, choosing instead prototypical American ones: World War II; Hollywood; the space race; politics and the counterculture; crime and punishment; the CIA.

By undertaking to "explain" Hitler, Mailer might have sought reconnection with his origins, but the resolutely Catholic cosmology at use here suggests otherwise. Should *The Castle in the Forest* prove his last major work, then it must be said he ends in strength, the virility of his inventiveness undiminished by the approach of death or the changing of literary fashion, or the dehumanizing onrush of digital technology.

Chauncey Mabe can be reached at cmabe@sun-sentinel.com.

LOAD-DATE: February 4, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH