

Norman Mailer

Norman Mailer got the idea for his 1997 novel, "The Gospel According to the Son" one night in a Paris hotel room. He couldn't sleep, picked up the Gideon Bible and started to read. As much as he admired the story, he was struck by how poorly it was told, and he knew he could do a better job. His first decision was ^{to} tell each event from Christ's point of view.

Q: It takes a certain temerity to write the life of Christ in the first-person, doesn't it?

A: It seemed to me the best way, although it has huge obstacles. I decided that the clarity was ~~more~~ ^{most} important than anything. ^{Moreover} Then on top of that, I liked the idea of daring to write about Jesus in the first person because my pride in being a novelist is that we dare things. We try things that are not easy, not routine. I'm not Evil Knievel when it comes to physical matters, but at least in intellectual matters, I want to feel – not that I'm some equivalent of Evil Knievel, although I have to say parenthetically that I respect him – that I'm willing to take chances other novelists wouldn't take.

Q: It almost sounds as if the challenge of writing "The Gospel According to the Son" was more stylistic than philosophical.

A: I'm not downsizing the importance of the topic; it's just that no matter what you're writing about, you have to find a way to write about it. Some have claimed this is the greatest story ever told and it may be. It's an incredible story, but it is not well written. It has extraordinary lines in it. Some of the things that Jesus said are at the least worthy of Shakespeare. But on the other hand, the lack of narrative consideration for the reader is striking.

Q: Your depiction of Christ seems more steeped in Sartre than the Gospels. Did the creation of an existential Jesus get in the way of portraying his divinity?

A: It didn't for me because unlike like the most orthodox Christian beliefs, which have Jesus not only the son of God but in a certain sense equal to God, I kept going to the other side of it, which is that God chose to give us his only son as a man. In other words, I saw him first as a man, a man who discovers to his deep, profound fear that he is the Son of God.

Q: There's something of a 2,000-year tradition depicting the life of Christ. How do you judge your efforts against the others?

A: I think most people who write about Christ come in with an agenda. If I had ^{one} ~~an agenda~~, it was to tell the story so it becomes ^{quite} ~~quite~~ readable and believable. Make it as believable as you can within a modest compass. In other words, no extremes. Take the miracles as they come up. Don't look for rational explanations of the miracles. Don't look for pious extrapolations. What I was interested in was this story, this wonderful story, this incredibly existential story – to be the Son of God and not know exactly what to do next, to have a feeling of a destiny larger than yourself and not be totally in command of that destiny.

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