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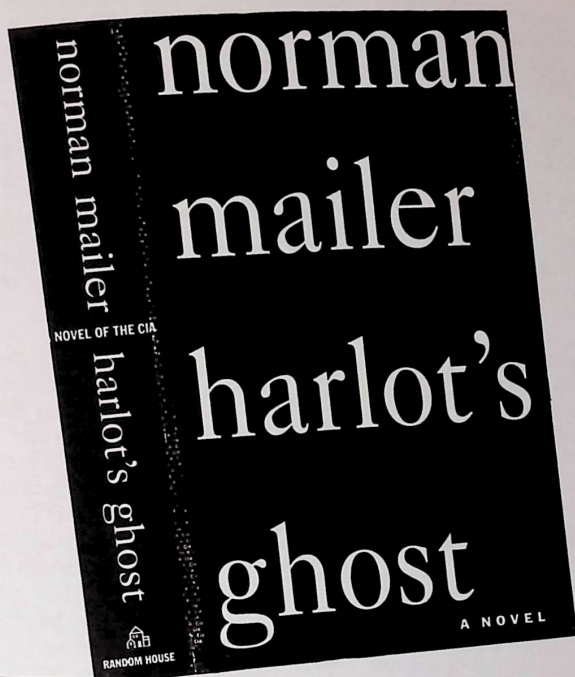
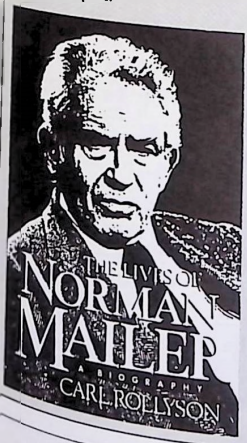
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Carl Rollyson's **The Lives of Norman Mailer: A Biography** was published last year by Paragon House, just as Mailer's enormous new novel appeared. Rollyson's last chapter contains the following discussion about the origins of *Harlot's Ghost*:

In the August 16, 1976 issue of *New York* magazine, Mailer published a long article, "A Harlot High and Low," the title of which came from an English translation of a Balzac novel, *Splendeurs et miseres des courtisanes*. As an epigraph he used a statement from his mentor Jean Malaquais: "There are no answers. There are only questions." Mailer began by pointing out that Balzac's book was "concerned as much with secret police as with the prostitutes who passed through its pages, but then whores and political agents made a fair association for Balzac." What did whores and political agents have in common? They were both actors, role players, pretending to be what they were not. The harlot acted "as if she loved you, and that was a more mysterious proposition than one would think, for it is always mysterious to play a role. It is equal in a sense to living under cover." For different clients, harlots can play different roles, and the assumed roles may become the most intense moments of their lives, more real than anything else to them. Mailer implied that this is what happened to the CIA; it had become consumed by its undercover roles; it had infiltrated every aspect of American life so that its ultimate roots were now untraceable. The CIA had become the country in some fundamental, weird way that Mailer knew he could not prove; he could only imagine the complex truth as a novelist turned essayist. To say that the CIA had this kind of subversive, mysterious hold on American life was tantamount, in Mailer's mind, to showing how novelists had lost their grip on the country's identity. Or as he put it at the end of the essay: "What a crazy country we inhabit. What a harlot. What a brute. She squashes sausage out of the minds of novelists on their hotfooted way to a real good plot."



Norman Mailer's **Harlot's Ghost** by Carl Rollyson

Born into a family of wealth, prestige, and power, Harry Hubbard, the narrator of *Harlot's Ghost* (Random House), gives himself no choice but to follow in his father Cal's footsteps and join the CIA. Harry, however, has never been sure of his manhood. Can he measure up to his father's impressive achievement in that organization? Hero worshipping Cal throughout his childhood, Harry can remember only a few incidents in which he has captured his father's attention—a skiing accident, for example, when Harry broke a leg but steeled himself not to cry out during a long, jolting trip to the doctor. Cal, realizing his mistake in taking an unprepared Harry out to the slopes, calls himself a "fathead," and Harry endears himself to his father by his stoicism and his gallant refusal to accept his father's self-criticism.

Cal arranges for Harry's initiation into the world of male adventure by persuading Hugh Tremont Montague ("Harlot") to act as Harry's godfather and mentor. Montague takes the teenage Harry rock climbing, and while he admires Harry's courage, he advises him to give it up, for Harry will try to overcome his every weakness, and Montague suspects this eventually could cost Harry his life.

By the time of his college years at Yale, Harry knows that he is destined for the CIA. Receiving the call from Montague, he enthus-

astically plunges into CIA training. Simultaneously he falls in love with Montague's wife, Kittredge, a brilliant psychologist—also working for the CIA—who has developed a theory she is anxious to explore: every human being has two personalities, an Alpha and Omega, not merely a split personality but two completely formed selves which may or may not be in harmony with each other.

The novel works endless variations on a dynamic axis between Alpha and Omega, interpreting both individuals and historical events in its terms. Kittredge herself is deeply in love with Montague, yet devotes an entire other self to Harry. With him she confides secrets she never shares with her husband. On a vaster scale this deception works within the CIA itself. Without double dealing in the CIA, Harry learns, he cannot survive. At one point he serves his first boss William King Harvey, in Berlin, while covertly relaying information to Montague back in Washington. Later, with his own father, he will face much the same split, working for him on the Bay of Pigs invasion while doing side jobs for Montague, his second father.

Harry's first assignment is Berlin, a melting pot of double agents. Everyone seems to be servicing at least two masters, and Harry quickly discovers that the politics of this ambiguous assignment has a sexual tenor as well.

Dix Butler, the strapping former professional football player who befriends Harry, is not only running double agents, he is also apparently engaging in both homo- and heterosexual relations. He invites Harry to sodomize him, promising to return the favor. Agents, like homosexuals, lead double lives. Consequently, agents are often homosexuals. Montague's own code name, Harlot, suggests that agents are paid instruments of pleasure, whether that pleasure consists of sexual knowledge or political intelligence. CIA agents, like harlots, sell only the roles they play.

Harry refuses Dix's invitation to have sex with him, apparently because Harry is afraid of the power Dix might hold over him as a result of their intercourse. Harry makes clear there is physical attraction when he kisses Dix on the lips in the very act of refusing Dix's plea for a more physically intimate relationship. Harry would like the power that Dix commands, but to become his sexual partner would rob him of his already slight claim to independence.

His period in Berlin is inconclusive, his departure abrupt. William King Harvey (renowned for building a tunnel under the Berlin Wall that tapped East German communications) discovers that Harry has been acting as Montague's agent. Harry's next assignment is Montevideo, where he learns how a CIA office is run, and where he begins to recruit his own agents, one of whom, Chevi Fuentes, is able to penetrate the highest levels of the Uruguayan Communist Party. Working under E. Howard Hunt—arguably the most fascinating and best realized character in the novel—Harry learns all the techniques of intelligence, especially admiring the élan with which Hunt courts and stimulates his sources of intelligence.

During Harry's sojourn in Montevideo, Kittredge breaks off her long-term correspondence with him. They have never consummated their love, but Montague has become suspicious and has cut off Harry's access to his wife. Driven by love for her husband, as well as her child, Christopher, Kittredge accedes to her husband's wishes. She writes Harry to say that she is ceasing communication, at the same time hinting that they may resume contact at some future unspecified date.

Although Harry's feelings for Harlot are ambivalent, he continues to follow his mentor's instructions, keeping him fully informed on the ambitious Hunt's moves. Hunt, no fool, is on to Harry, but knowing the ways of the agency prefers to use Harry precisely because of Harry's contacts with other powerful figures. Hunt is wary of Montague, for both men are in a quest for the directorship of the CIA.

Mailer does a superb job of creating a credible picture of the inner life of the

agency. A reading of *Harlot's Ghost* provides convincing insight into how an intelligence gathering agency becomes a self-absorbed "company"—the term often applied to it. Dominated by Anglo-Saxon Ivy League types, who take their opposition to Communism to be not merely politically correct but virtually a religious principle, a Christian response to evil, the CIA becomes enmeshed in its own ethos, making us doubt how much of an external threat to security actually exists.

Harry's personal failure comes with the Bay of Pigs invasion. He buys the CIA conceit that he can land a small expeditionary force on Cuba's shores, back it up with air support, and topple Castro. All the elements of failure are present: the Cuban exile groups are divided and infiltrated by double agents; administrations are changing and it is not clear that President-elect Kennedy will support even a covert use of American firepower; and worst of all, the CIA is hopelessly deluded about the extent of the opposition to Castro in Cuba. Outside of Cuba, there is also much admiration for Castro, even in the CIA, though no one will admit it. E. Howard Hunt runs himself ragged trying to maintain his jerry-built coalition against Castro, involving Mafia elements that in retrospect seem part of a ludicrous effort to embarrass Castro before they assassinate him.

In the very midst of the Bay of Pigs plot, Harry is involved in a torrid affair with Modene Murphy, mistress of Chicago mobster Sam Giancana and of President Kennedy. Montague has put Harry on Modene's case, but their affair takes on a life of its own as Harry jealously follows her shuttling between Giancana and Kennedy—yet another demonstration of Kittredge's dualistic theory, which is at its strongest in helping to explain how Kennedy, who is presented sympathetically, can simultaneously lead a country with considerable courage and acumen and yet feel the need to engage in the double dealing of love affairs. In one instance, he even invites Modene to share his bed with himself and another woman. Modene is offended, but she recognizes Kennedy's need not merely for sex but for various partners and confidants, for no one person can satisfy the Alpha and Omega of human nature.

Kittredge herself resumes correspondence with Harry and promises a more intimate relationship. Indeed, she will eventually betray Montague and marry Harry. She wants to know about every aspect of his work, and he obliges—only occasionally lying to her—thereby violating the CIA's rules of confidentiality. Harry's letters to Kittredge form the bulk of his Bay of Pigs narrative, as they do in the section on Montevideo. His correspondence is the vehicle for him to comment on the shaping of his own character. Ulti-

mately this is what the novel is all about, for Harry is the only figure who, doubting his fortitude, yet is determined fully to succeed in the CIA. The novel in fact is framed at the beginning and end by Harry's present (1983-84), in which he re-reads his letters and diary-like accounts of the years between 1955 and 1963, and will go on presumably (in the projected second volume of the novel) to recount more recent events in Saigon and in the White House.

*Harlot's Ghost* is an impressive evocation of one man's experience in an incredibly complex organization that has been implicated in the momentous events of the postwar world. At the same time, the novel founders, since everything must be filtered through Harry's sensibility, and no event, no detail, can be overlooked lest it distort the process by which Harry's personality is formed. There is no plot, though the novel opens with the hint of one: Montague is missing and presumed dead. Is he really dead? Is he the ultimate double agent? Has he gone over to the other side? These tantalizing questions raised by the novel are never answered in the first volume, which Mailer ends with Harry's disturbing coda: "I might never finish the book of Harry Hubbard . . ."

After 1300 pages, it is not surprising to learn that the 68-year-old Mailer is exhausted. More than once, he has promised multi-volume novels which never materialized. *Harlot's Ghost* will probably have to stand by itself. As such, it is uneven, reading like an 18th century epistolary novel, often gripping, due to the intimacy and directness inherent in letters, but also turgid and sometimes improbable. During the Cuban missile confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, Harry supposedly writes thousands of words to Kittredge in the bathroom, hoping his colleagues will not notice his absence and call him incontinent in a crisis.

Kittredge also is a problem, or rather a convenience. Like many of the characters, sometimes she sounds like herself, sometimes like Mailer, especially when she gives voice to the author's fondest ideas about dualism. As a woman, she does not have much identity. She exists so Harry may adore her. Her theorizing becomes tiresome when references to Alpha and Omega are used as a tag line, as if this shorthand could explain a character's behavior.

By making so much of the novel consist of letters, Mailer has convincingly captured the interior life of the CIA and shown how it has made incredible blunders due to its self-made incredible strategy, however, absorption. As a novelistic strategy, however, the letters fail. Even when they are fascinating, there are simply too many of them, convulsed with detail, providing a rich verisimilitude while diluting narrative power. *Harlot's Ghost*,

like many literary masterpieces, is a major work that fails admirably. Mailer has nearly succeeded in portraying a CIA commensurate with his complex imagination. Its characters resonate and the book cannot be ignored.

Having spent three years writing Mailer's literary biography, completing my book before *Harlot's Ghost* was published, I can't resist figuring out where this novel, his largest by far, fits in. Harry, obviously, is Harlot's ghost, his shadow—the spook that haunts the father figure, emulating and opposing him as Lieutenant Hearn harries General Cummings in *The Naked and the Dead*, as Mikey Lovett chafes at Ned in *Barbary Shore*, and Sergius O'Shaughnessy dogs Eitel in *The Deer Park*. Almost all of Mailer's work has been in the confessional person or centered on a single consciousness who feels he must mature and fulfill himself or die. There is Rojack walking the parapet in *An American Dream*, defiant of his fear of falling as Harry Hubbard is in his rock climbing. Often the father/power figure is one of those WASP landlords of the country, who almost always come supplied with three names—Hugh Tremont Montague—although the bluff Irish Mailer loves so well can sometimes swagger in sporting names such as Barney Oswald Kelly in *An American Dream*. Even in *The Armies of the Night*—Mailer's most poised presentation of himself—there is the elder statesman, Robert Lowell, to carry on Mailer's elevation of Waspsdom. It is no accident that Mailer should give Harry Hubbard a father named Cal, Lowell's own nickname.

The perpetual outsider, the immigrant son, the Jewish nice boy, the graduate from Harvard who is not of Harvard, Mailer has always been fascinated with what he conceives to be the ruling class. It is the equivalent of Fitzgerald's fascination with the rich. Mailer is obsessed with people born with a pedigree, who are so at ease in their own skin (George Plimpton comes to mind) while the Mailers box and head-butt their way to fame and fortune.

Mailer and his slew of narrator/surrogates constantly worry that they are not good enough, tough enough. In Mailer the man and the writer there has always been the danger that he will fall off the cliff because he does not know how to measure his chances, to know what risks are really worth taking. Better take all the risks, he reasons, rather than lose an opportunity to prove himself. The Plimptons of this world may work at it, but nothing is beneath their dignity. Mailer has often been accused of doing things that sully his station as a writer. But can you imagine him doing a Pop Secret television commercial and getting away with it, as Plimpton has done?

In *Harlot's Ghost*, as in his other fiction,

Mailer will muscle his way into the major institutions and events of his time, invent his pedigree, and provide a history of his times, retailing his theories about Fidel Castro, Marilyn Monroe, Hemingway, and narcissism—all familiar to readers of *The Presidential Papers*, *Pieces and Pontifications*, *Genius and Lust*, and countless essays published over the past 30 years. It is sad to report that there is nothing new in the theories—they simply emanate from other characters endowed with Mailer's voice. When Dix Butler spreads his cheeks for Harry Hubbard, there is no way for a Mailer aficionado not to think of the anal scenes in *Ancient Evenings*.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with a novelist telling the same story over and over again. Most writers have only one great story to tell, yet the great ones continually engage us because they find new characters and new ways of plotting. Without plot, Mailer is diffuse—giving us two paragraphs on Harry's tennis game and pages on Allen Dulles's death when a well turned sentence or two would do. And the analogy between harlots and agents is much more briefly and suggestively put in Mailer's mid-'70s *New York* magazine article, the genesis of the novel.

*The Naked and the Dead*, although it is by no means a specimen of Mailer's best, contains a simple defining movement—a long patrol on a Pacific island on which he was able to pile the enormous weight of a panoramic exploration of American society and human character. No matter how stereotypical the characters—say Wilson, the Southerner—they had to interact with each other on patrol and create the genuine drama of the novel. Wilson is slow, easy. Croft, the platoon leader, is impatient and brutal. Between them is a truly impressive range of types we get to see in action. As Wilfred Sheed puts it in his review of *Harlot's Ghost*: "What made Mailer famous and worth

writing about in the first place was neither his knowledge of the human heart, which is variable, nor his global theories, but his overpowering intuition of men at war—with each other, with civilization, but best of all with and within the organizations created by and for themselves?"

*Harlot's Ghost* works best when it reveals this essential Mailer: when a crude type like William King Harvey in Berlin goes up against Hugh Tremont Montague, when E. Howard Hunt is busy running his agents in Montevideo and making the social scene at the same time. Sheed is right in saying that the novel has no geopolitical sense. One would never know from Mailer whether or not what the CIA has done has any roots in reality—any more than one can tell whether or not General Cummings in "The Naked and the Dead" is a credible version of an American general.

Mailer's major characters wonder whether they fit in. They have no core and are not centered in themselves. As such, they are often fascinating, absorbent sensibilities, but they are also ghost-like, as elusive as Mailer's Monroe, who sums up as well as any of his characters a void in the self that no Mailer figure successfully surmounts. That no experience can be definitive, no test of one's courage the final certification of authenticity, is what has made Mailer endlessly appealing and dissatisfying. At this late stage, what else can one write for a conclusion except "to be continued." ■

Carl Rollyson is a professor of art at Baruch College of the City University of New York. He is the author of the biographies Marilyn Monroe: A Life of the Actress, Lillian Hellman: Her Legend and Her Legacy, and Nothing Ever Happens to the Brave: The Story of Martha Gellhorn.

"Norman's Place" by Tucky Fussell

