

Re: HARLOT'S GHOST by Norman Mailer

This new section, to my mind, is wholly successful, aside from a few very minor points I'll get to later. Despite the fact that we've reached page 800, I'm left feeling that what I'm reading is all groundwork building up to some sort of massive, involved and explosive conflict to come.

The writing is astonishingly vivid; the portrait of postwar Berlin is thoroughly believable, from the warrens of the Department of Defense to places like the Back Door and the S&M club Harry and Butler wander into. The portrait of the CIA is similarly convincing; I have no way of knowing whether the procedures and information and such are accurate, but I have friends whose family is all for the most part CIA, and the picture I get from them of the atmosphere of the CIA is no different from the murky games-within-games, big-picture-always-beyond-comprehension that operates here. It's clear that Harry's caught up in a chaotic organization run not as a functioning bureaucracy but as a collection of undefined organizations run by strong personalities that are always in conflict over whose will will direct the CIA, even as the CIA as a whole competes with the FBI and foreign-but-friendly intelligence organizations in the same way for dominance in the similar games played with the agencies of hostile governments. Harry's first loyalty is to his country, but things aren't that simple -- serving the US means serving the CIA but serving the CIA means serving Harlot and Cal Hubbard against Bill Harvey. Harry's delight in being a double agent is palpable, but his lack of understanding of the games he's playing is even more so.

While the games Harry is playing (at Harlot's bidding; even when Harry tries to handle things on his own he's operating in a scenario set up by Harlot) to hide his identity as CLOAKROOM from Harvey are fascinating, it's well-contrasted by Harry's increasingly involved relationship with Butler. Harry seems at times absurdly timid next to Butler, but Butler, while obviously far more in control of any situation in which he finds himself, seems desperately unsure of himself and any determined opposition withers him (his story about losing his date to a thug in a bar just presents this in the abstract; Harry's facing him down in the Back Door shows his weakness equally well). Butler's brashness and perversity, and Harry's ambivalence toward it, keeps the question of what the hell's going on with Kittredge in the present, last seen hundreds of pages back, very much alive.

The problems I had may well be due to the fact that this is only part of the story, and it may be that they'll be addressed in future material, but I'll mention them in any case. Throughout the novel, the CIA characters are all personally quite convincing. We see several sides of the same people and events, as told by different CIA personnel, and in each case, whoever is speaking is thoroughly believable (this is perfectly in keeping with the CIA-connected people I know; they're always utterly convincing, even when they choose to take a completely different position from the one they usually take. I've discovered that when they realize they're losing an argument, they deftly switch sides and act as if they've been arguing your side all along -- when you point out that you're both arguing the same position they act as if they're glad you've finally seen the light). This leads us, or me anyway, to distrust what is actually being said and to look at what's being accomplished. On that level, Harlot and Harry aren't up to much of any consequence in this section. They seem to be playing games within the CIA while Harvey (and to a far lesser extent Butler) are getting things done in intelligence terms. CATETER may be of questionable worth and not lasting, but any accomplishments that Harlot is making during the same period are unseen if they exist at all. The end result of all this is that I feel as if Harry is being jerked around by Harlot to no apparent purpose while they both get in the way of CIA progress in the person of Harvey, and I'm left wondering if we're ever going to see why Harlot deserves his rep (he's obviously very capable, but at what?) and whether Harry is going to remain a pawn of Harlot or take any action on his own initiative. This may of

Mailer/2

course happens in the second half of the book; I hope so.

Similarly, Kittredge's Alpha/Omega theories don't seem to do much more than continue in this section. They makes sense and they fit in with the murky atmosphere of the book, but it's as if we're regularly being reminded of Harry's belief in them to maintain them as a presence so they'll be prominent in readers' minds when it comes time for them actually to have a strong effect on Harry and the others caught up in all this.

As Mailer indicates in both the ms and his letter, he thinks that the "last page" of Harry's memoirs is too hasty, too synoptic, and I've got to agree. Rather than tie off the memoir section before Harvey has exposed Harry's duplicity and Harlot has rescued him -- and drop in the material as vignettes as the book continues -- I think that it deserves to be fully fleshed out. There's no chance that readers will be bored by a fuller description of the events, and bringing it up to Harry's return to Washington allows it to reach a natural stopping point before breaking it off. (Of course, it's possible that Mailer doesn't want it to reach a natural stopping point, since it's purportedly an incomplete manuscript and will read more convincingly as such if it stops in the middle of things, but that's a minor point; the material will certainly stop with plenty of questions left unanswered, which should be more than enough to make it convincingly "unfinished.") There are enough details that need to be explained (like the logistics of Harry's getting Harvey a transcription of the tape of the argument with Gehlen when it's on the same tape as Harry's conversation with Harvey's wife) that it should be told in detail at least until they get back to Berlin, if not Washington.

Certainly, the manuscript has never flagged by this point, and even at 800 pages I'm perfectly comfortable with the fact that it's only half over; it feels about half over, since we've got a lot of questions established and very few answers. The characters are very well realized, from major characters like Harvey down to the secretary of one of the British contacts Harry has to call on Harvey's behalf, and the jumping back and forth between plotlines (such as when Harry's facing what looks to him like exposure as CLOAKROOM and before he can contact Harlot and figure out what to do, he's off for a night on the town with Butler) maintains an enormous level of tension. It's hard to put down, even in the stifling humidity we had over the weekend, and it's irritating to be left in that hotel room in Moscow, trapped for what looks like six months without a clue as to what going on with the High Holies and what the hell Butler has to do with Kittredge.

kurt

HARLOT'S GHOST by Norman Mailer

The very good news is that this is Norman's best book, and his best book by far. The writing, characterizations, descriptive passages, plotting, and all the rest are absolutely superb, and I think that -- if Norman sustains the manuscript at its present level of quality for the remainder of the book, which I think he will -- it's an absolute masterpiece which will be read down the ages, long after most other authors are forgotten.

That's the good news. But the very bad news is that we're being asked, or at least it's our job, to judge the book on two levels, as a work of literature and as a commercial proposition (the latter because Norman will need the money to take the time to finish it if it goes beyond the deadline, and because the book must then be able to earn the publisher back his money plus a profit. The fact that the book is shaping up as literature of the highest order is, in my view, and I think everybody's, without question. But I also think it's become equally clear, now that we've seen 800+ pages, that it isn't going to be a breakthrough book commercially. And to make things a little worse, I think that Random House is also going to see that clearly, and therefore won't want to put up any more money since they've already put up so much.

I think that Random House will see the material as one of the greatest books of our time, and I think they'll be delighted with the quality of the material; but I think they'll also see, simultaneously, that the book isn't at all the kind of book which most, virtually all, bestsellers are today. I think they'll be proud of the book and proud to publish it, but I think they'll also feel that the book will overwhelm the people who are already Mailer fans -- people equipped with enough intelligence, taste, education, and all the rest -- and perhaps even add a limited number of additional Mailer fans, but probably not end up selling enough additional copies to merit additional dollar investment. When Jack and I went up to fight for the additional money which has now been coming in monthly, Jason helped immeasurably in quieting down the strictly-business types by saying in a very facile way that the investment is safe because some books earn X dollars in hardcover and Y dollars in paperback, and there's no reason why this book can't do that. Jason was able to say this on the basis of the first relatively small group of pages, but he won't convince if he says it now on the basis of the present large amount of material.

To compound the problem, it would neither work nor be a good idea for Norman to think about cutting the present material to the bone and doing the whole book in, say, the same number of pages as we have at present. The book is being written at exactly the right pace and length as is right to tell the story properly, and cutting it would only injure the book without accomplishing the purpose of making it more commercial. Norman has always been a literary writer who doesn't sell as many copies as some of the crappy commercial writers, but literary writers never do sell as many copies as commercial writers -- and Norman sells more than other literary writers. I fear he's going to have to settle for that, and, after all, writing a masterpiece, which is what he's doing, is not such a terrible thing. The only thing that is terrible, and I know Norman's going to hate this when I say it to him, is that I think he's compelled by commercial circumstances to complete this work of literature much faster than he'd like. But there's even a consolation there, though I don't think Norman will agree, and that's that Norman seems to write supremely well when he writes quickly. TOUGH GUYS contains some of his best writing, and these new 400 pages, written relatively fast, contain his very best writing.

Scott: HARLOT'S GHOST

My reaction to this new section of the novel could be short or long, depending on how many superlatives you wanted in the list. Of the three chunks we've been given so far, I find this one the most rewarding -- richer, denser, more engaging, even more entertaining (there's some acute humor here, which, with the exception of a couple of incidents at the Farm, does not figure largely in the earlier sections). Each page is replete with aperçus, clevernesses, genuinewisdom -- to say nothing of the continue awe-inspiring use of the language.

But now that we have 800+ pages, the important question is whether we have too much of a good thing. We have a lot of rum and raisins, but do we really have a pudding? While I was reading along, savoring each page, wallowing really in the luxuriousness, I still had the nagging feeling in the back of my mind that what we have here is all preparatory; it seems one vast prologue to what must still be forthcoming -- a main plot. And if this 800 pp represents 2/3s or 3/4s of the book, as I thought at the time of reading, then we'd have a major structural problem. I deliberately didn't read Norman's letter until I finished the reading, so I now know that what we have represents about half the book, therefore no structural problem. Nevertheless, the question remains, since we're faced with an end-of-the-year deadline, whether it would not be wiser to recommend that Norman write the second half of the novel as quickly and as shortly as possible, and then go back and slash mercilessly the first half of the book so that the two halves match. In view of the fact that the money stops at the end of the year, we certainly have to ask him to write quickly, but I'd heartily recommend that we not try to force out an average sized book for the sake of expediency. To do so would just cut away much of the richness (and much of the pleasure), and wouldn't make it a different or a better or a more successful book -- just shorter. This is very much a literary novel the audience for which will be those who love the use of language, the depth of characterization, the lushness and vividness of description, etc. I think this book will sell more copies than any other of Norman's books since THE NAKED AND THE DEAD, but it won't in my opinion be the kind of breakaway bestseller that a more decidedly commercial novel could be. Since nothing can be done (again, in my opinion) to change this prognosis much other than to write a different book, it would be criminal to deprive literary history of half the wealth of this truly wonderful work.

jack

P.S. I didn't answer yet the specific question about the synoptic end of this section, but in light of my general comments above I think he should go ahead and write it out at the projected 20-30 pages. It's disappointing as a synopsis, and to merger the material in the next half of the book would be less desirable in a section that's already going to have quite a few flashback sections.

Scott:

Re: HARLOT'S GHOST page 485-812

There's good and bad news in these pages, which have finally brought us to the point where we can get a real grasp on Norman's intentions and have some understanding of just what kind of book he's writing.

On the one hand, this section has the very best writing yet in a book which already contained much of what I thought was Norman's best writing ever. Here's a novel which contains, in Harlot, one of the richest, most fascinating, most multi-dimensional characters there's ever been, and certainly the best characterization of a spy ever. And in that same novel, Norman comes up with a second characterization of a spy, Bill Harvey, which is not only equally well-done but utterly different from the first! I could follow this Bill Harvey for 10,000 pages. The Dix Butler material is equally gripping, and so is the virtuoso description of the trip to CATHETER. All the descriptions of the inner workings of the CIA remain consistently and enormously interesting; the mood and physical description of Berlin in those days is evoked as well as anything I've ever read; even the minor characters, such as Gehlen and Harvey's wife, are vivid enough to stand out sharply and satisfyingly, even against the kaleidoscopic Harlot/Harvey/Butler/Hubbard background.

On the other hand, with 812 pages in hand, we can no longer kid ourselves about what we really have. As I've said before, I suspect I'm the worst person in the world to be asked for an opinion about a Norman Mailer manuscript. That's because I'm a charter-member of the core audience; when we talk about a Mailer book reaching out to a new audience, we don't mean me. I'm the audience he's supposed to be adding to. Now, here we've got Mailer at his very very best, not only at the peak of his writing powers but dealing with material which is, inherently, as interesting as any subject matter he's ever had to deal with before. So of course I'm going to love it. I felt a very real sadness as I got near the end of the batch, a sadness that there was so little left before the end. That's how much I was enjoying myself.

So if anyone has any concern about whether this material is going to satisfy and thrill the people who were satisfied by, say, ANCIENT EVENINGS, I can put that to rest right now. Even if this is only half the book it's more than enough to state as a fact that the book has greatness and, at least to those of us in the core Mailer audience, is going to be received with glee and gratitude. I can't wait until we get the next batch.

But while I thought ^{before} this point that this book, being an espionage novel, might be a commercial breakthrough as well, frankly I no longer

think so. The kind of conventional tight plotting and suspense which in my opinion is necessary to reach deeper into the mass audience than Norman has reached before hasn't even been attempted here, much less brought off. What we really have is an 812 page prologue to a story that hasn't really been begun at all (except for a few pages out of the first 200), may not be begun until vastly later in the book, and, for all I can tell even after 812 pages, perhaps is never going to be begun at all. Presumably Norman is getting nearer to developing all these thousands of strands into a plot of some kind, but if you're going to do that at page 1,000, you might as well not do it at all as far as the mass-market is concerned. (Don't get me wrong: I'm not suggesting he abandon any plans to give the book a greater sense of direction. I'm just saying that when he does, he'll be doing so only for those readers loyal enough to him to stay with him this long, and those readers, again, are his old readers, his regular readers.)

Therefore, my overall recommendation for the future has changed 180 degrees from the last time I commented on this book. I no longer think there's any point at all in adjusting this book for a possible expansion of Norman's appeal to the mass-market. It's so very ^{far} from that that any adjustment, even a major one, is still not going to be nearly enough to make this into a "spy novel" in the pop sense of that term. So, rather than make this less than the best possible novel for the sake of reaching an audience we're never going to reach, why not forget about all that and advise Norman to take off any last reins he may be wearing for the sake of making the book more pop, and write whatever he wants to write, at whatever length. The last time around I'd recommended various cuts in the first parts of Hubbard's memoirs, but I no longer think that's worthwhile. The stuff that would be cut is wonderful stuff and it would have hurt the book, and my guts, to have it cut, but it seemed necessary if the book was going to be kept short enough and tight enough to sell to the pop espionage market. Now that selling to that market doesn't seem realistic, why cut at all? The Mailer loyalists, far from being put off by the book's great length, will welcome it; it was not for them that I suggested cuts the last time.

If a modest effort to make this more commercial is going to have no effect, then only a spectacular effort could have even a small effect. Such a spectacular effort could be spectacularly expensive and would not, in my judgment, be repaid by any significant increase in sales.

In a nutshell, I'm saying this is a literary masterpiece, and it should be treated and regarded as such and left alone. A sow's purse can't be made out of this silk ear, if you follow me. We can only hurt its power by trying to make it more pop, without actually succeeding in selling more copies than it would otherwise sell. If it is going to sell more copies than other Mailer novels it'll be strictly because of its subject matter.

Three small comments, in case no one else has caught these: Dix's story in chapter 17 about hitting the guy with the beer-can has been used

once before in the manuscript, unless I'm losing my mind. Is the near-repetition of "get your ass off my pillow" on page 796 and "get your cheeks off my pillow" on 528 deliberate? And is the near-repetition of "You have written your letter, now mail it" on page 810, and the earlier use of this phrase (which I haven't been able to relocate yet) deliberate?

Russ

P.S. With regard to the question of whether the last page should be expanded. When I got to that page, which was before I'd read Norman's letter, I said to myself that Norman was having an incredible and inexplicable attack of laziness. I just thought it was a disgrace that he should run out of gas at this point and expect us to swallow such a half-assed conclusion and inadequate treatment of such important events. I was angry. The material is so out of whack with the rest of the book that I think most readers will react similarly, and if not, they'll at least be bewildered. That, combined with my feeling that extra length doesn't hurt the book, leads to a strong recommendation the pages be expanded to full length.

not found: DELVALLE ELADIO

KOHLY MARIO GARCIA

Cuba 1961

Hinckle, W. Turner, W. The Fish is Red. 1981 (176-80)

total pages: 5

MARTINEZ EUGENIO ROLANDO

Cuba 1961-62

Blumenthal, S. Yazizjian, H. Government by Gunplay. 1976 (129)

Borosage, R. Marks, J. The CIA File. 1976 (97)

CounterSpy F/73 (23)

CounterSpy SU/75 (45)

Frazier, H. Uncloning the CIA. 1978 (63)

Freed, D. Death in Washington. 1980 (67)

Hinckle, W. Turner, W. The Fish is Red. 1981 (22 113 119-21 134 301)

Hougan, J. Secret Agenda. 1984 (28-9 109-10)

Lobster Magazine (Britain) #12/86 (5)

Marchetti, V. Marks, J. The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence. 1974 (75)

Marshall, J. The Iran-Contra Connection. 1987 (45-6)

Myerson, M. Watergate: Crime in the Suites. 1973 (153-4)

Powers, T. The Man Who Kept the Secrets. 1979 (180 321 328)

Reasons, C. The Criminologist. 1974 (217)

Sale, K. Power Shift. 1976 (275)

Scheim, D. Contract on America. 1988 (298)

Scott, P.D. Crime and Coverup. 1977 (20)

Weissman, S. Big Brother and the Holding Company. 1974 (125 168 253 289)

Wise, D. Ross, T. The Invisible Government. 1974 (x)

Wise, D. The American Police State. 1978 (157-5 227 235)

total pages: 39

not found: VARONA TONY

not found: ARTIME MANUEL

STURGIS FRANK A

Guatemala 1954 Cuba 1958-62 Mexico 1961 Angola 1982

Anson, R. They've Killed the President! 1975 (298 257)

Ashman, C. The CIA-Mafia Link. 1975 (23 26-7)

Blumenthal, S. Yazizjian, H. Government by Gunplay. 1976 (99 117 161)

CounterSpy F/73 (23)

CounterSpy SU/75 (45)

CovertAction Information Bulletin #18/83 (54)

Fensterwald, B. Coincidence or Conspiracy? 1977 (505-9)

Frazier, H. Uncloning the CIA. 1978 (63)

Freed, D. Death in Washington. 1980 (34 67 128-9 133)

Hinckle, W. Turner, W. The Fish is Red. 1981 (50-4 118-9 170 200-3 224 298-306 31)

Hougan, J. Secret Agenda. 1984 (80)

Kruger, H. The Great Heroin Coup. 1980 (18 143-5 162-3)

Liberation Magazine 4/77 (6-7)

Lobster Magazine (Britain) #12/86 (6)

Los Angeles Times 11/5/77 (13)

Mader, J. CIA-Operation Hindu Kush. 1988

Marshall, J. The Iran-Contra Connection. 1987 (45)

Miami Herald 6/20/86 (1C 3)

Myerson, M. Watergate: Crime in the Suites. 1973 (176)

Oglesby, C. The Yankee and Cowboy War. 1976 (74)

Parapolitics (Paris) 8/82 (1)

Parapolitics/USA 3/1/83 (32)

Rolling Stone 5/20/76 (44)

Scheim, D. Contract on America. 1988 (189 192)

Scott, P.D. Crime and Coverup. 1977 (15 18 20 42 56)

Smith, J.S. Portrait of a Cold Warrior. 1976 (335)

Summers, A. Conspiracy. 1981 (346 448 508)

Weissman, S. Big Brother and the Holding Company. 1974 (94 110-2 167-8 289)

Wise, D. The American Police State. 1978 (158 178-9)

total pages: 88

FIORINI FRANK (FRANK STUEGIS)

Cuba 1958-62

Freed, D. Death in Washington. 1980 (34)

Kruger, H. The Great Heroin Coup. 1980 (142-5)

Miami Herald 6/20/86 (3C)

Scott, P.D. Crime and Coverup. 1977 (42)

Smith, J.E. Portrait of a Cold Warrior. 1976 (335)

Weissman, S. Big Brother and the Holding Company. 1974 (111-2)

Wise, D. The American Police State. 1978 (178)

total pages: 12